RECLAIMING THE BLACK CHURCH'S PROPHETIC VOICE: QUEERING SACRED BELIEF AND CENTERING THE LIVES OF BLACK QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

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If ministry leaders participate in a symposium about affirming LGBTQIA+ and QTPOC+ individuals, then they will be equipped to promote healing and inclusion within the church and the surrounding community. Grounded in Acts 8:26–40, it reframes Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as a sacred practice rather than a secular framework. Through a six-week symposium at Witherspoon, ministry leaders engaged in scripture, history, and lived experience to develop inclusive practices. The study examines how affirming QTPOC fosters healing, reshapes theological imagination, and restores relevance, offering a replicable model for congregations seeking to embody radical hospitality and justice as core Christian commitments.

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I am deeply grateful to the two congregations I was entrusted with while completing this research. To the faithful parishioners with whom I have had the privilege of walking alongside while serving at Powerhouse Church of Boston and Witherspoon Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis—thank you for teaching me enduring lessons of perseverance, compassion, and boundless love. It was these principles that you taught me, inadvertently, while I completed this degree. To the staff that I serve alongside at Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, you were exceedingly patient and supportive while I juggled multiple responsibilities throughout this process. Your love, support, and encouragement always came right on time.

You allowed me to see the holiness that was deeply embedded throughout this process and to continue to build a more inclusive ministry where all God's people are included, welcomed, and have belonging. Moreover, I am deeply thankful for the village of Elder that has guided my steps along this journey. Their wisdom and prowess to accept only my best have anchored me far beyond my own expectations. It has been a great pleasure to sit under the tutelage of some of the brightest intellectuals on the faculty at United Theological Seminary, especially my faculty advisors, Dr. Vance P. Ross, Dr. Lillian C. Smith, and Dr. Rudy Rasmus. I would not have been able to make it through this process without your fellowship, friendship, and commitment to the study I would ultimately produce.

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DEDICATION

While a student at Morehouse College, I encountered the person who would point me in the direction of an inclusive church and told me that we should attend together. I had never heard of or been exposed to an inclusive ministry. Up until this point, I was completely done with ministry and did not ever want to return to church. Robert orchestrated the liberation of my theology. Thank you! It is because of you that I found freedom in my identity and was able to connect my spirituality with my sexuality. Your love for me created an avenue I otherwise would have never traversed. This work is dedicated to you. This work is also dedicated to Black and Brown LGBTQIA+ Christians who have yet to find freedom. Those who have abandoned their faith because Christianity often did not make room for them.

It must be borne in mind that the tragedy of life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disaster to be unable to capture your ideal, but it is a disaster to have no ideal to capture. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for. Not failure, but low aim is sin.

—Benjamin E. Mays

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Black Church has found itself standing at a critical crossroads. Long regarded as a prophetic institution, one that has historically spoken truth to power, nurtured communal resilience, and provided sanctuary for those pushed to the margins, the Black Church now faces growing questions about its relevance, credibility, and moral authority in an increasingly diverse and justice-conscious world. Data from the Pew Research Center indicate a measurable decline in attendance within historically Black Protestant churches, particularly among younger Black adults. At the same time, Pew findings reveal an increase in Black Christians affiliating with multiracial and predominantly white congregations. This shift does not reflect a loss of religious commitment, but rather a reconfiguration of where Black Christians seek spiritual formation, belonging, and affirmation.[1]

Scholars note that younger Black adults are especially likely to leave Black congregations they perceive as socially or theologically restrictive, particularly around issues of gender, sexuality, and embodied identity.[2] While the church once functioned as a central gathering place for spiritual formation, political organizing, and communal

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[1] Pew Research Center, *Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.*, Washington, DC, 2014; Pew Research Center, *Religious Landscape Study*, 2015; and Pew Research Center, *Black Americans and Religion*, 2021.

[2] Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

healing, shifts in social awareness, generational values, and theological inquiry have exposed significant gaps between the church's professed commitment to justice and its lived practices of inclusion.

One of the most pressing challenges confronting the Black Church today is its ongoing struggle to meaningfully engage and affirm Black Queer and Trans People. Although the Black Church has historically positioned itself as an advocate for the oppressed, many congregations have remained resistant to addressing issues of sexuality, gender identity, and embodiment—often framing such conversations as distractions from the gospel rather than as essential expressions of it. As a result, countless Black LGBTQIA+ individuals have experienced spiritual harm, exclusion, and erasure within spaces that once promised liberation. This dissonance has contributed to declining church participation, especially among younger generations who increasingly view the church as misaligned with their lived realities and moral commitments.

Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, located in Indianapolis, Indiana, stands within this broader ecclesial landscape. Like many historically Black congregations, Witherspoon has long embodied a commitment to faith, justice, and community engagement. Yet, as cultural understandings of identity, equity, and belonging continue to evolve, the church faces an urgent call to reexamine how its theology, leadership practices, and communal life either reinforce or resist systems of exclusion. While individuals from diverse backgrounds may enter the physical space of the church, their presence does not always translate into genuine belonging, spiritual safety, or full participation in the life of the congregation. This disconnect raises critical questions

about how churches define discipleship, hospitality, and faithfulness in the twenty-first century.

This doctoral project contends that one pathway toward reclaiming the Black Church's prophetic voice lies in reframing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) as sacramental or, more simply, as a spiritual practice that is rooted in scripture, theology, and the lived ministry of Jesus Christ. Rather than viewing DEI as a secular or political intrusion, this project argues that inclusive practices are deeply embedded within the Christian tradition and are essential to the church's witness and vitality. When DEI is understood as sacramental (or a spiritual practice), it becomes a means through which congregations can cultivate healing, restore trust, and embody the radical hospitality that draws people towards their sacred spaces, but more importantly, to God.

Grounded in Acts 8:26–40, the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, this project explores how early Christian inclusion disrupted religious, racial, social, cultural, and gendered boundaries. The Ethiopian Eunuch becomes a powerful theological lens through which to examine contemporary exclusion within the church. His question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" continues to echo in modern ecclesial contexts where institutional policies, theological assumptions, and cultural norms still function as barriers to full participation.

This project is designed around a six-week symposium hosted at Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, bringing together ministry leaders to engage scripture, historical analysis, theological reflection, and lived experience. The symposium aims to equip leaders with the tools necessary to cultivate affirming, trauma-informed, and justice-centered practices that center Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC) within the life

of the church. Through this process, the project seeks to assess whether intentional theological engagement can shift perceptions, deepen discipleship, and strengthen the church's capacity to serve as a sanctuary for all.

Chapter One, Ministry Focus, examines the congregational context of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, identifying key challenges, cultural dynamics, and opportunities for growth. This chapter explores the relationship between discipleship, missional identity, and the church's engagement with marginalized communities, with particular attention to how leadership formation influences congregational practice.

Chapter Two, Biblical Foundations, provides an exegetical analysis of Acts 8:26–40, situating the Ethiopian eunuch within broader biblical narratives of inclusion and exclusion. This chapter employs historical-critical and queer interpretive lenses to demonstrate how scripture affirms radical belonging beyond rigid social and religious boundaries.

Chapter Three, Historical Foundations, traces the legacy of prophetic disruption within Christian history, examining moments when marginalized voices reshaped ecclesial imagination. This chapter situates the contemporary Black Church within a longer tradition of Spirit-led transformation and resistance.

Chapter Four, Theological Foundations, engages practical theology and missiology to explore the relationship between belief and practice. This chapter argues that theological commitments inevitably shape congregational life and that inclusive theology is essential for ecclesial vitality.

Chapter Five, Interdisciplinary Foundations, draws from anthropology, public health, and small group ministry to examine how stigma, shame, and cultural narratives

influence faith communities. This chapter highlights the impact of exclusion on both spiritual and physical well-being, particularly regarding sexual health and communal trust.

Chapter Six, Project Analysis, evaluates the implementation of the symposium, analyzing pre- and post-engagement data to assess shifts in leadership perception, theological understanding, and ministerial practice. This chapter reflects on lessons learned and offers recommendations for congregations seeking renewal through inclusive praxis.

The central hypothesis of this project is that when Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are embraced as spiritual practices, congregations are better equipped to reclaim their prophetic voice, restore trust among marginalized communities, and embody the liberative love of Christ. This project seeks not only to address the specific context of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church but also to offer a replicable model for other congregations committed to justice, healing, and faithful witness in a changing world.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

If ministry leaders participate in a symposium (or conference or workshop) about affirming LGBTQIA+ and QTPOC+ individuals, then they will be equipped to promote healing and inclusion within the church and the surrounding community. Etched in the tapestry of American religious life, predominantly African American churches have long served their communities as a vibrant and relevant voice, rich in heritage, faith, and their unwavering commitment to stand in solidarity with the "least of these." The Black Church held us together as a people. African American churches have historically not only served as gathering places for the oppressed, despite their churches being bombed, but also stood firmly against the injustices of their time.

How we define Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is important. The way that I choose to define DEI is as follows:

Diversity refers to the presence of differences within a given setting. It encompasses a wide range of attributes and experiences, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, disability, and sexual orientation, as well as differences in perspectives, thoughts, values, and beliefs. Diversity is often valued in social, educational, and professional environments because it promotes a richer, more inclusive, and understanding culture, and can lead to increased creativity, problem-solving, and innovation. Diversity can provide advantages

only when it is combined with fundamental changes in individual behaviors and attitudes, group norms and approaches, and organizational policies and practices.[1]

Equity refers to the fair and just treatment of all individuals, considering their diverse circumstances and needs. It's about ensuring that everyone has access to equal opportunities and is not disadvantaged by systemic barriers, biases, or discrimination. Equity extends beyond the concept of equality, which implies treating everyone equally. It acknowledges that some individuals may require additional support or different resources to have the same opportunities as others, due to historical or systemic disparities. Achieving equity is not about treating all people the same; it's about giving each person what they need to succeed, which often requires systemic change.[2] To achieve this, cultural competence skills must be developed to fully understand, respect, and respond appropriately to the unique cultural variables and the diversity of the people and communities being served.[3]

Inclusion is ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their diverse backgrounds or characteristics, are welcomed, respected, supported, and valued within a group or organization. It's about creating environments where everyone feels they can participate fully and authentically, have a sense of belonging, and are able to contribute their perspectives and talents. Inclusion involves actively working to accommodate differences,

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[1] Bernardo M. Ferdman, ed., *Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 6.

[2] Curtis W. Linton, *Equity 101: The Equity Framework—Book 1* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2011), 42.

[3] Curtis W. Linton, *Equity 101: The Equity Framework—Book 1* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2011), 58.

eliminate discrimination and barriers, and foster a culture where diversity is embraced, and all members feel they are integral parts of the whole.[4]

The Black Church has undoubtedly remained at the epicenter of community development, cultural preservation, and social justice and reform, and has used biblical hermeneutics to establish principles to support its cause. As the wheel of social justice turns, once again, the black church is in a critical position where it must reevaluate its commitment to certain social justice issues that conflict with the traditional teachings of the church and the conservative tendencies of the black family. As the world around it continues to evolve, the African American church has generally remained decades behind the rest of the world, which further isolates the church from the world that it has been called to serve.[5]

As desperate cries for increased visibility are heard around the nation, these cries have begun to make their way through the hallowed and holy halls of these sacred black institutions that have presented enormous challenges as well as inexhaustible opportunities for the church to truly become a place for all people. Black churches must move from their position of selective invitations that only include those who have assimilated to their norms, culture, and convictions towards a more open invitation where persons' lived experiences are at the epicenter of all decisions. In recent years, DEI practices have been embraced by more progressive institutions and liberal states, while the conservative side has fought heavily against this level of intentional inclusion. During

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[4] Jennifer Brown, *Inclusion: Diversity, the New Workplace & the Will to Change* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017), 78.

[5] James Carroll, *Christ Actually: Reimagining Faith in the Modern Age* (New York: Viking, 2014), 110.

the second Trump administration, during his State of the Union address to the nation, Trump touted ‘we ended DEI’ as one of his major accomplishments since retaking office.[6]

In May of 2023, Florida’s Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law a bill banning public colleges and universities from using state or federal funds for programs that “advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion.” This bill also banned general education core courses that “distort” historical events or teach “identity politics.[7]” Conservative states are not the only ones having controversy around the topic of DEI; corporate leaders are also finding themselves at odds with certain branches of DEI. Elon Musk, the world's richest man, tweeted on his X platform, “My pronouns are Prosecute/Fauci.[8] This was not the first time the savvy CEO expressed his annoyance and disdain with one of the most inescapable parts of language. In 2020, Elon tweeted, “Pronouns Suck”.[9] When governments and corporate leaders pass anti-DEI bills and make provocative statements that ignore the lived experiences of others, it creates a hostile environment for already marginalized groups to live in.

If ministry leaders participate in a symposium (or conference or workshop) about affirming LGBTQIA+ and QTPOC+ individuals, then they will be equipped to promote

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[6] Kate Tornone, “Trump Touts ‘We Ended DEI’ in State of the Union,” Higher Ed Dive, February 25, 2026, https://www.highereddive.com/news/trump-end-dei-state-of-the-union/813091/

[7] Associated Press, “DeSantis’ Anti-DEI Education Law Has ‘Chilling Effect’ in Florida, Experts Say,” *NBC News*, May 2, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/desantis-anti-dei-education-law-chilling-effect-florida-rcna85646.:contentReference[oaicite:5]{index=5}

[8] Elon Musk (@elonmusk), “My pronouns are Prosecute/Fauci,” *X (formerly Twitter)*, December 11, 2022, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1601894132573605888

[9] Elon Musk (@elonmusk), “Pronouns suck,” *X (formerly Twitter)*, July 25, 2020, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1286869404874088448.

healing and inclusion within the church and the surrounding community. The black church, specifically at Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, must engage in a dialogue about how best to serve those whom we perceive as the least of these in our society today. In contemporary society, it is increasingly evident that, when considering the least privileged or marginalized groups, it is imperative to acknowledge and integrate the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) as a guiding spiritual practice. What I argue, repeatedly throughout this paper, is that DEI, if practiced faithfully, is sacramental. This recognition is crucial for creating a more inclusive and equitable environment, where the message of Jesus can continue to reflect and be heard by the diverse fabric of our modern world. Christians must learn how to attract others regardless of their differences and do less of attacking others because of their differences. 'Othering' a population while simultaneously trying to capture their allegiance is antithetical to how Jesus conducted his ministry.[10]

In the eighth chapter of John, we find a woman undergoing public shaming and condemnation because she was found in the act of adultery. Those who were gathered wanted to see Jesus enact their version of justice on this woman under the Mosaic Law, which instructs that the woman should be stoned. Jesus proposed a philosophic self-reflection that challenged the righteousness of her accusers. This reflection invited the accusers to cast the first stone at the woman they had brought these charges against, only if they were without sin or blame. This woman's sin and humanity were brought to the attention of the entire community. In the biblical narrative, rather than imposing the kind

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[10] Carlton Pearson, *The Gospel of Inclusion: Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God and Self*(New York: Atria Books, 2009), 205.

of punitive justice that her accusers demanded, Jesus chose to exhibit a form of justice that emphasized equality and inclusion. By equating her transgressions with those of her accusers, Jesus disrupted the conventional narrative of sin and judgment. This act was not just a demonstration of mercy but also an intentional practice of inclusion. Through this approach, Jesus included the woman in the realm of God's love and grace, a stark contrast to the public condemnation her accusers sought. This story highlights a significant spiritual practice where public sins are not judged more harshly than private sins. Jesus's response served as a powerful example of how acknowledging and addressing one's own shortcomings is essential before casting judgment on others. By doing so, he challenged the societal norms of his time and provided a framework for a more compassionate and equitable approach to justice, one that aligns closely with the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. In this context, DEI is viewed not just as a modern concept but as a timeless principle that can be traced back to spiritual teachings and practices, exemplified by Jesus, who advocated for a more inclusive and understanding approach to all individuals, regardless of their background or actions.

In reading this story, one might only look at the actions of the woman who was found in adultery. The biblical writers were clearly writing to an audience that was patriarchal and male-dominated, as the actions of the man with whom this woman was found were never mentioned in the text. Selective righteousness at the expense of gendered accountability raises an important question: Was this woman solely responsible for the alleged sexual violation, or was the male participant intentionally omitted from the moral scrutiny of the crowd? Was she forcing him to engage in sexual activity with her? The text does not give us any indication that either of these was the case. So then, how

does this woman stand alone in judgment? Would it not be equitable to bring both to Jesus so that Jesus could deal with their actions fairly?

The misogyny within the text only seeks to bring justice against this woman but disregards the actions of the man. The lack of equity shown to the woman forced Jesus to reflect on this inequity. Whenever inequity exists, it is accompanied by dismay and grief to those who can visibly see it. Jesus wrote, aimlessly, in the ground, perhaps reflecting on the number of times he had to confront the inequity being done to a woman. As he traced lines in the earth, perhaps his thoughts lingered on the societal norms that so often marginalized and oppressed, wondering how many more times he would need to stand as a beacon of justice and compassion in a world rife with inequality. In these moments of quiet reflection, it's conceivable that Jesus pondered the profound impact of his actions, understanding that each intervention was not just a momentary act of kindness but a powerful statement against the injustices deeply rooted in society. His silent contemplation in the dust served as a testament to his profound empathy for the downtrodden and his unwavering commitment to challenging the status quo, offering hope and a new way of being to those who had long been silenced and overlooked.

Finally, Jesus took a stand and stood for equity. Although he did not deal directly with the man with whom this woman was found, he indirectly dealt with the man through dealing directly with the other brothers who had assembled. Jesus had no condemnation towards any of the men who were present, who admittedly had sinned, through their inability to cast a stone at the woman, and forgave them all. Instead of Jesus upholding the unjust Mosaic Law that each of them had broken at some point in their lives, Jesus displayed a new type of justice that was characterized by mercy.

I raise this text not to align DEI with sin, but rather as a type of inherent characteristic that was embodied in Jesus. This was just showing us that DEI is an outward and visible sign or an inward and spiritual grace. That DEI is sacramental. When Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are not acknowledged and practiced as spiritual values within Witherspoon Presbyterian Church and its affiliated bodies, there is a failure to perceive and understand the pain of individuals through a lens of respectful acknowledgment and empathy for each person's unique experiences. We view them through the eyes of our own bias and validate our beliefs through norms (cultural norms and societal norms/laws) that support our biased perspective. This flawed approach to showing care for others is best seen in our choices of who to side with on matters of justice.

When DEI is viewed as a sacramental, it can inherently bridge divisions through intentional acts of care that are not rooted in our religious piety or doctrine.[11] DEI as a spiritual practice explores ways to include those who are marginalized and on the edges of our society, exposing those who are comfortable seeking to gather at the nucleus and casting judgment on those who are at the edge. The African American church and Christianity at large are guilty of casting out the marginalized and building our temples as closed, gated communities. We have used our doctrine and lack of responsible hermeneutics to encapsulate the few and reject the many.

The argument I raise as DEI as sacramental challenges the church to explore how it can impact the lives of others by intentionally and proactively inviting them to become

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[11] John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 75.

actors in the faith while also ensuring that the faith has enough love, empathy, and support for these members. The Church should be the spot where all prodigals feel they've come home. It should be the building with the biggest table.[12] The question then becomes, how can these faith communities maintain their cultural and spiritual integrity while also deliberately expanding their reach and embrace to be more inclusive of diverse populations?

In addressing this, the African American church might discover that some of its beliefs, practices, and or traditions must be reevaluated and carefully interpreted to ensure that the "least of these" are allowed to participate. Embracing DEI as sacramental does not diminish the voice, impact, or reach of our beloved faith institution; rather, it equips the institution to achieve relevance and influence in communities where it once had no relevance or influence or has lost its influence and reach.

As church attendance is on the decline in almost every Christian community, many churches have become fixated on the belief that if they appeal to youth and millennials, they can overcome the mass exodus of their congregations. Instead of addressing the real issues that are making their churches unattractive to younger generations, many churches have invested thousands of dollars in perfecting their Sunday morning services. They have incorporated fog and haze machines, stage lights, and overpriced LED screens to aesthetically enhance and modernize their worship experience. These enhancements have become so elaborate that, in a few cases, it would be difficult for one to distinguish the modern church from a techno nightclub.

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[12] John Pavlovitz, *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 83.

The aesthetics of our church have evolved and taken on a new shape, while the overall message and separatism have remained essentially unchanged. One of the privileges I have had while serving as a pastor is the honor of hearing stories from individuals who were raised in the Black church. One common rhetoric that has served as a unified experience is the belief that you should never question God. In many black churches and families, the idea of questioning God was seen as a form of blasphemy. In these spaces God was presented as an authoritative dictator who punished those that was not blindly obedient to his will. 1 Samuel 15:22, a verse often recited in black churches, conveyed the message, "Obedience is more valuable than sacrifice," emphasizing the importance of following God's will over any other actions. Ironically, God's Will was synonymous with the will of the church (ecclesia), the pastor, the elders, and the doctrine.

If any objections were raised about matters pertaining to or stemming from this collective, the response was that it was God's intended design. Rather than questioning God's design, it was strongly encouraged to submit to it. What I had come to discover on my own was the opposite of what the black church taught me. While at Morehouse College, I found that questioning God was not an act of defiance. Rather, it was an act of obedience and faith. I learned that questioning God was a demonstration of faith because I trusted God to have the answers. In parallel with this revelation, I realized that the church taught not to question God to protect their inability to explain some of their conduct.

In 2018, at a Chicago church, a young black, identifiable gay man was attending a church service. This young man had frequently attended the church and was targeted by other members and leaders due to his appearance. The young man yearning for a sense of

spiritual community did his best to "assimilate" to what was being required of him and did his best to wear "appropriate" clothing for men. This young man, like countless others, must learn to assimilate to church culture in order to be accepted and welcomed as an active participant in the life of the church. The occurrence of this young man being requested to come out into the aisle and being shamed was captured on the live stream of Powerhouse International Ministries. The pastor stood this young man up in front of the entire congregation and said, "I hold a standard in here. Whatever you do on the outside is your business, but I will not let drag queens come in here," he continued. "And if you're gonna come in here, you're gonna come in here dressed like a man … If you're a man, dress like a man. If you're a woman, dress like a woman. I'm not going to allow it. My salvation is more important, and God is holding me accountable."

I find it very difficult to believe that this young man's appearance offended God. In the pastor's public shaming of this young man as he was attending his church seeking spiritual rejuvenation, the pastor connected his disapproval with God's disapproval. Furthermore, like the accusers of the woman who committed adultery, the pastor highlighted this young man for his public "sin" without survey the room to see which other cisgender males frequented a gay night bar, wore women's garments, or had a secrete afear with another same sex person in their private life.

As an African American pastor called to care for the castaways living on the fringes of our society, my heart grieves for the lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our churches, specifically black congregations. All my life, I had a particular interest in justice work. I was familiar with the concept of diversity and equality, but I had only taught it through the lensed of my blackness. However, I grew older and gained more

experience of the world around me, and I noticed that the church did not care to cater to the needs of other minority groups. Moreover, they were not even willing to talk about the issues affecting these groups. I could recall discussing the epidemic known as HIV/AIDS in the youth group I was a part of. Several of my friends at the time began talking about the virus because either they or someone they knew had been diagnosed. In an effort to answer my question and avoid a true conversation about the virus, one of the Elders present said, “That is the white gay man’s disease. Don’t you worry about that”. When I later came out as same-gender-loving around the age of 16, this same Elder said that I would be a pedophile. In that moment, my heart sank to the bottom of my stomach, and I recall feeling like the entire world would forever be against me. Through one self-discovery, I became the black sheep in my church and community.

After the adults I looked up to begin walking away from me, and the invitations to speak at NAACP youth rallies and other local churches stopped coming, I began to feel the pressure of my decision. At school, things were no better. For the most part, I was passable and lived most of my life in the comfort of appearing to be heterosexual. A close friend of mine was over at my home playing games after school. He and I played sports and built a friendship because he excelled in Basketball, and I excelled in Football. Somehow, this friend got access to my phone and began forwarding my private conversations with another male friend to people around my high school. Unbeknownst to me, I went to school the next day, and word had gone around the school that I had been having explicit conversations with another guy in the school. This commenced the beginning of many within my high school referring to me as the “Gay Football Player”.

Although I was becoming comfortable with my sexuality, I had not entirely accepted it yet. Internally, I was trying my best to undo my “gayness” to go back to the comfort of my everyday life. The more that I attempted to seek deliverance, the more I grew to hate myself. I truly desired to be accepted. Not just by God, but I also wanted to be accepted again by my community and my friends. I never imagined that coming out would be so lonely and so isolating. However, even in all of this, I never felt distant from God. Although my family, friends, and those in the community grew distant towards me because of my sexual confession, I felt that God had so delicately drawn me closer to him.

When church communities are not rich in diversity and are unwilling to embrace what they do not understand, it leaves no room for discussion and growth. Participants looking to engage with these faith groups are rarely allowed to display their authenticity. I have witnessed countless men, who in their private lives, were romantically involved with other men, but because of the stigma and shame that black faith spaces presented, these men lived their lives closeted. The phenomenon of Christians who are 'closeted' or living 'on the Down Low' (DL) presents significant public health concerns. These individuals, often concealing their true sexual orientations due to societal or religious pressures, may inadvertently contribute to health risks. This hidden lifestyle can lead to psychological stress and potential physical health implications, both for the individuals themselves and the broader community. It highlights the importance of greater openness and acceptance within religious contexts to mitigate these health risks and foster overall well-being.

The prevalence of stigma surrounding sex and sexuality has been a fundamental factor in the rise of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). This stigma, which is often fueled by cultural, social, and religious beliefs, inhibits open discussion and education about safe sexual practices. Christianity has historically taught and supported a doctrine of abstinence, no sex before marriage, and has openly ridiculed the use of contraceptives like condoms and dental dams. While teen pregnancy, unplanned parenthood, and new cases of STDs skyrocketed, the black church, as an institution, widely remained silent and continued to push its message of abstinence and discouraging the use of contraceptives. This contributed to a lack of awareness and a lack of adaptivity, bringing into question the relevance of the church for not being willing to preach and teach a message that could save and lead to a more fulfilled future.

I remember my mother, a devout Christian committed to raising her children in line with Christian doctrine, facing a challenging period in her life when she became pregnant with my younger sister. As an unwed mother, she bore not only the child but also the heavy burden of societal and religious judgment. The experience was steeped in shame and religious embarrassment, particularly in a community where such circumstances were often viewed through a lens of moral scrutiny. Her situation highlighted the harsh realities and stigmas attached to single parenthood within specific religious contexts. Instead of the church becoming a place for a single parent to run to for resources, moral support, and community, the church became the antithesis of each of those things for my mother. Her story is unfortunately too familiar for unwed single mothers. Mercy and compassion are rarely shown to these women, and they were sat down and forced to withdraw from all aspects of ministry temporarily. These unwedded

mothers carrying around an infant served as a reminder to the church that these women were engaged in the act of fornication.

The act of fornication was intolerable in the black church. It is a grave injustice when our commitment to our doctrine alienates and marginalizes people because of their humanity, choices, or lived experiences. It highlights a critical issue within the church: the need to reconcile doctrinal teachings with the realities of human behavior and the importance of offering support and inclusion instead of isolation and judgment. This approach calls for a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of individual choices, recognizing the complexities of human nature and promoting a more accepting and supportive religious community. To better understand the humanity of ourselves and others, it is crucial to dismantle stigmas that lead to the alienation and marginalization of individuals and adopt a more inclusive approach to providing care and community to those who are often considered the “least of these.”

Throughout my time in ministry, I have observed numerous individuals and groups who have been overlooked or disregarded by the church, their experiences pushed into a figurative shadow of denial, as if adhering to the notion, "out of sight, out of mind." Whether it is a LGBTQIA+ identifying person, a non-believer (non-Christian), the visibly disabled, women, or the poor, our current system does little to support such individuals fully. These are people who initially sought solace and sanctuary within the church, but feeling unseen, neglected, or spiritually and emotionally abused, many have now established their own spiritual spaces in the periphery of the church-stained glass. Close enough to be seen, but far enough to remain untouched. Among them are those who have turned away from Christianity, disillusioned by their experiences, while others

have ventured beyond traditional Christian practices in search of spiritual fulfillment. This trend highlights a pressing issue: the church's failure to acknowledge and address the diverse needs and realities of its broader community, resulting in a growing detachment between the church's teachings and the evolving spiritual quests of many individuals.

In conclusion, this paper undertakes a vital exploration to answer three significant questions that resonate at the core of contemporary church life, particularly within the context of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church. First, we examine the consequences of overlooking the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) within the church. The neglect of these fundamental values could have profound implications, not only on the church's social fabric but also on its moral and spiritual influence in the community. We must explore what the impacts of ignoring the principles of DEI are in the life of the church. Such implications, I perceive, would counteract the church's mission and dampen the effectiveness of its evangelistic work. As I explore this question, I aim to inspire the church to engage in a moral dialogue with itself about how we measure effective outreach when our houses of worship are not designed to support the needs represented in our community. The repercussions of ignoring lived experiences, based on the belief that such experiences are outside our responsibility, must cease. The church must adapt to the needs of its community to be effective.

Secondly, the paper examines whether congregants perceive a linkage between their church involvement and their sexual health outcomes. This inquiry is crucial in understanding how church teachings and practices around sexuality might affect the physical and psychological well-being of its members. Religious leaders have a responsibility to ensure that those they serve are equipped with resources to protect their

sexual health. The conversation around sex and sexuality cannot remain taboo within the black church. What I hope to explore is if the black church takes a more active approach by dealing with the sexual health of its members, can we reduce the spread of disease within our congregation and communities.

This exploration is grounded in the belief that the church, as a central and influential institution in many people's lives, can effect meaningful change in public health outcomes. By breaking the silence around sex and sexuality, providing education and resources, and fostering an environment of non-judgmental support and guidance, the church could become a powerful agent in promoting sexual health and well-being.

Moreover, this approach aligns with the broader mission of the church to care for the holistic well-being of its members, regardless of its doctrine and specific beliefs that it presumes should be uncontested. Addressing sexual health issues openly could not only help in controlling the spread of diseases but also in reducing the associated stigma, thus contributing to a healthier, more informed, and compassionate community. The goal of this exploration is to understand how the black church can transform its approach to sexual health, making it a topic of community support and health education rather than one of secrecy and shame.

Lastly, by implementing DEI principles within the context of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, I will investigate how these principles, when utilized as a spiritual practice, can restore trust and help expand membership. This exploration is pivotal in determining whether such an inclusive approach can rejuvenate the church's relevance and appeal in an increasingly diverse and socially conscious society.

As I seek to answer these questions, I hope that the findings will not only shed light on the current state of the Black Church but also offer insights for a more inclusive, health-conscious, and socially relevant path forward. This journey is not just about examining the status quo but about envisioning and forging a future where the church is a beacon of inclusivity, diversity, equity, health, and spiritual vibrancy for all its members.

To build upon the themes already established in this work, it is critical to situate the conversation about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) not only as a contemporary ethical imperative but also as a theological necessity. If the Black Church is to thrive in the 21st century, it must revisit and reinterpret its biblical foundation through a lens that acknowledges the sacred worth of all people. This includes engaging in intentional theological reflection around the image of God (imago Dei) present in every individual, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, or background.

Such a reflection requires a return to core gospel principles—compassion, radical hospitality, and prophetic justice. When Jesus declared in Luke 4:18 that he came "to proclaim good news to the poor... to set the oppressed free," he was not merely speaking to the socioeconomically disadvantaged but to all those pushed to the margins of society. To deny the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons and QTPOC+ believers is to hinder the work of liberation Christ inaugurated. Furthermore, it is necessary to confront the theological harm that has been perpetuated in the name of doctrine. The Black Church, often regarded as a liberative institution, must acknowledge where it has mirrored the very systems of exclusion it sought to resist. True liberation theology requires that we listen to the testimonies of those who have been spiritually wounded, offering not only apology but reparation through transformed practices.

In practical terms, churches must reassess their leadership pipelines, ordination practices, language from the pulpit, and community outreach programs. Who gets to lead? Whose voice is trusted in interpreting Scripture? Are our worship services spaces where everyone sees themselves reflected? Until these questions are addressed with honesty and courage, the church cannot claim to be a sanctuary for all.

Educational opportunities, such as symposia, reading groups, and inclusive seminary curricula, can help faith leaders unlearn deeply ingrained prejudices. Just as we would not allow someone to preach who lacks theological training, we should not allow unchecked bias to dictate who is worthy of pastoral care, affirmation, and belonging.

To affirm DEI as a spiritual practice is to embrace the fullness of Pentecost, when the Spirit descended on all flesh, not just the flesh that fit cultural or religious expectations. It is to become a truly incarnational church, one that mirrors the expansive love of Christ in both word and action. The path forward is not always easy, but it is holy, and it is necessary if the Black Church is to reclaim its prophetic identity and remain relevant to future generations seeking not only truth but belonging.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

The word eunuch occurs in eight passages of the New Testament, five times in the Acts of the Apostles, particularly in chapter 8 concerning the baptism of the minister of Queen Candace, and three times in the Gospel of Matthew (19:10–12). Rev. James A. Kleist, Ph.D., explains that eunuch, like procurator, tetrarch, and centurion, is a foreign word preserved in English translations of the Bible. The word eunuch was decidedly negative. Despite its crudeness and its offensive implications, it is used, in a noun and verb form, throughout the bible.[1] Kleist maintains that there is no compelling reason to discard the term; rather, its use serves a critical interpretive function, especially in Acts, where it operates as both an official title and a theological signal.[2] The meaning of eunuch is inherently contextual. In Matthew 19:12, Jesus distinguishes between those who are born eunuchs, those made so by others, and those who choose to live as eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. This threefold classification suggests both literal and metaphorical readings, expanding the interpretive horizon beyond physical condition to intentional, spiritual devotion. Sahin Acikgoz expands this further by showing how

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[1] Francis J. Moloney, "Matthew 19:3–12 and Celibacy: A Redactional and Form Critical Study," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2 (1979): 51.

[2] Rev. James A. Kleist, S.J., *"Eunuchs in the New Testament," Catholic Biblical Quarterly* **7**, no. 4 (1945): 447.

eunuchs, particularly Black eunuchs trafficked in the East African slave trade, were gendered not only by physical alteration but through their racial and religious difference. This challenges Western assumptions that transness is a purely gender-based or modern identity.[3] Acikgoz argues that historical eunuchs, especially Black children trafficked to the Ottoman Empire and castrated, were seen as different not just because of their bodies, but also because of their race and religion. Their Blackness and non-Christian identity made them "other" in the empire. In many modern Western contexts, we assume gender identity is defined primarily by physical traits (like genitals) or internal self-knowledge ("I know I am a man/woman/nonbinary"). But in historical contexts, especially in empires like the Ottoman Empire, gender was not defined by the body alone. It was shaped by how society saw and controlled bodies through systems of power like race and religion, which helped define their gendered identity, not just their lack of genitals.[4]

More importantly, as Kleist notes, the historical view of eunuchs frames them as emasculated, socially weaker, and incapable of full inclusion, particularly in marriage and temple participation. It is against this backdrop of marginality and exclusion that Acts 8:36 emerges with transformative force: "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" With this question, the Ethiopian eunuch does more than seek inclusion; he confronts and prophetically challenges the boundaries of belonging. His voice pierces centuries of exclusionary tradition and dares to imagine a faith where even

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[3] Sahin Acikgoz, "What Color Is Trans? Notes on Trans Historiography in the Afterlife of the East African Slave Trade," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 40, no. 1 (2024): 153.

[4] Sahin Acikgoz, "What Color Is Trans? Notes on Trans Historiography in the Afterlife of the East African Slave Trade," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 40, no. 1 (2024): 156.

those historically dismissed as "other" are fully welcomed.[5] Dr. Andrew Wymer, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, makes a unique observation as he explores this text primarily through examining how the water plays a critical role in this text.[6] When we think of holy baptism, we often think of a clean ocean or contained water. The nature of the water in Acts 8:26-40 is not clearly defined. In fact, it is ambiguous, left for the readers to interpret.

The exact nature of the road that the eunuch was travelling on is unclear. It is possible that the designation of "desert road" or "wilderness road" indicates a frequently used but less carefully constructed and maintained pre-Roman route.[7] Wymer adds, we don't know the water's specific location, name, depth, flow rate, surface area, source, or quality. However, we do know that this water was visible, that it was in the desert, and that it was proximate to the road (v. 26).[8] This water was highly likely to be used frequently due to it likely being a commodity in this desert land. Perhaps the water was used by humans, beasts of burden, and wild creatures to drink and bathe. Lower-class or impoverished human travelers who could only afford to travel on foot would have depended on it.[9] Ironically, Wymer notes, the Ethiopian Eunuch was neither of these. The

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[5] Rev. James A. Kleist, S.J., *"Eunuchs in the New Testament," Catholic Biblical Quarterly* **7**, no. 4 (1945): 447.

[6] Andrew Wymer, "Between Text and Sermon: Acts 8:26–40," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 78, no. 1 (2024): 63–65.

[7] Michael Avi-Yonah, "The Development of the Roman Road System in Palestine," *Israel Exploration Journal* 1, no. 1 (1950): 54–60.

[8] Andrew Wymer, "Between Text and Sermon: Acts 8:26–40," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 78, no. 1 (2024): 63.

[9] Andrew Wymer, "Between Text and Sermon: Acts 8:26–40," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 78, no. 1 (2024): 63.

eunuch was traveling by chariot, indicating that he was economically well off and had no need to stop at this water—other than to water the animals. This water was far from clean, yet the Ethiopian Eunuch asked the jarring question, "Look, here is what! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" (v. 36).

Dr. Sean D. Burke, Associate Professor of Religion at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa does a queer reading of the Ethiopian Eunuch, framing it as a "Drag Show". The ambiguity that Wymer notes concerning the water is a unique tie into how Burke reflects on the Ethiopian eunuch's queer body within this story. Framing it as a drag show is not intended to be a mockery but rather a metaphor for a queer lens on a sacred narrative. Burke writes:

Here is the crisis in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. The audience knows that there are many reasons to prevent the eunuch from being baptized. He threatens masculinity itself. In the language of the Jewish discourses, he transgresses the divinely sanctioned boundary between the categories of male and female. His testicles have been crushed or removed. He may be either the subject or the object of gender-deviant sexual activity. It is not possible to determine his religious identity. Indeed, all the ambiguities in the eunuch's identifications provide reasons to prevent him from being baptized.[10]

Furthermore, the reason the eunuch is considered a sexual minority is because Deuteronomy 23:2 specifically prohibits eunuchs from the worshipping community of

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[10] Sean D. Burke, *Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

Israel.[11] The Deuteronomic exclusion law clearly stated, “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord”.

Before Philip ever encounters the Ethiopian Eunuch, he is led by the Holy Spirit twice.[12] The first time is when Philip ended a preaching tour in Samaria, he was told by the Holy Spirit to go south to the road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. It was on this road that he would encounter the eunuch. As he is on this road, he overheard the Ethiopian Eunuch reading a passage (Isaiah 53:7-8) from the prophet Isaiah out loud. The passage reads:

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished.

This is when the Holy Spirit speaks to Philip the second time, prompting him to talk to the eunuch.[13] It is the spirit that brings Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch together not their geographical information, ethnic categories, or political entity.[14]

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch exemplify a facet of the American ethos deeply rooted in embracing individuals irrespective of their differences. This selfless ideology of

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[11] The Queer Bible Commentary, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 572.

[12] Huizing, Russell L. “Identifying Leaders: The African Eunuch as a Model of Christian Leadership.” *Neotestamentica* 50, no. 1 (2016): 247– 248

[13] The Queer Bible Commentary, ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache (London: SCM Press, 2006), 573.

[14] Marianne Bjelland Kartzow and Halvor Moxnes, *Complex Identities: Ethnicity, Gender and Religion in the Story of the Ethiopian Eunuch* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 184.

consciously coexisting in a habitat that acknowledges the differences of others, not out of kindness to their humanity, but rather by respecting their individuality. This segment of American society embodies a spirit untouched by the confines of hermeneutical heteronormativity, allowing for the unrestricted flow of divine connection that reaches beyond one's comfort.

The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch serves as a beacon of inclusivity, transcending barriers imposed by societal norms and fostering a genuine connection based on love and understanding. In a cultural landscape often marked by division, exclusion, heteronormativity, and whiteness Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch stand as a testament to the transformative power of acceptance and empathy, embodying a profound commitment to recognizing and celebrating the inherent worth of every individual, regardless of perceived differences.

Acts 8:36-40 is commonly interpreted as a passage illustrating the essence of evangelism, with Philip's actions serving as a fulfillment of the Great Commission as outlined in Matthew 28. While this interpretation is valid and essential within the Christian context, I contend that this text provides a profound insight into the concept of inclusion. There is a complex web of categories outlined in this text, while many interpreters have limited their understanding of this text to one without the theoretical approach of intersectionality.[15]

While scholars like Jervell, Dahl, and Shauf see this story as part of Luke's literary and theological strategy as he is narrating this story, I do not believe Luke's

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[15] Marianne Bjelland Kartzow and Halvor Moxnes, *Complex Identities: Ethnicity, Gender and Religion in the Story of the Ethiopian Eunuch* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 185.

intentions were to only set the scene for global evangelism. The interpretation of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts has often centered around questions of religious identity, particularly his relationship to Judaism. Jacob Jervell, for example, argues that Luke was not primarily interested in the eunuch's Ethiopian origin or his status as a eunuch, but rather in his relationship to Judaism. Jervell questions whether the eunuch was a Diaspora Jew, a proselyte, a God-fearer, or a Gentile.[16]

Dahl, writing in honor of African New Testament scholar Harry Sawyer, critiques the use of modern concepts of "nation" when interpreting biblical texts. He argues that "nation" in this context is not a constitutive identity marker in Antiquity. Philip would have been less interested in the nationality of the Eunuch and more interested in his religious identity, which would have taken precedence.[17] Instead, Dahl emphasizes the eunuch's exclusion from the Jewish temple due to his physical status, as described in Deuteronomy 23:1, which made him ritually impure and ineligible for full participation in Jewish worship.[18] Dahl sees this exclusion as symbolically important to Luke's larger theological message about expanding mission beyond traditional boundaries.

Scott Shauf adds that the story in Acts 8 is a narrative preview of Jesus' command to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), even though the full discussion of the Gentile mission only emerges later in Acts 10–11 with the Cornelius episode. Shauf's

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[16] Jacob Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Meyers KEK 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 270–71.

[17] N.A. Dahl, "Nations in the New Testament," in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays in Honour of Harry Sawyer*, eds. M.E. Glasswell and E.W. Fasholé-Luke (London: SPCK, 1974), 54–68.

[18] N.A. Dahl, "Nations in the New Testament," in *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World: Essays in Honour of Harry Sawyer*, eds. M.E. Glasswell and E.W. Fasholé-Luke (London: SPCK, 1974), 62.

perspective goes a bit further than Jervell and Dahl. Shauf makes a bold claim that the eunuch's story can have no immediate impact on the church because the eunuch is an isolated figure and after his baptism isn't expressed to have expanded the mission proclaimed in Acts 1:8.[19] Luke, if viewed as the historian, has decided to portray in miniature a foreshadowing of the fulfillment of the rest of Jesus' mandate as the eunuch would then take this message back with him as he traveled back to Ethiopia.[20] According to Shauf, this story points to the idea that the Gospel will reach the ends of the earth. However, since the narrative doesn't continue after the eunuch's baptism, it ultimately has little effect on showing the church's actual growth or expansion.

It's important to note that each of these views has significant issues, which I will address together shortly. Before doing so, let's look closely at Shauf's perspective, which, in my opinion, overlooks the impact inherent in oral storytelling. When Luke narrates this encounter, he intentionally leaves the Ethiopian eunuch's post-baptismal journey open-ended. Scholars like Russell L. Huizing assert that Philip can leave the brand new covert in Sanaria because he knows that he does not leave him on his own, but he leaves him with the Holy Spirit.[21] Whether or not Huizing's account is accurate, Luke's storytelling technique reveals that the true power of oral narrative lies not in explicitly resolving every detail but rather in compelling the audience to imagine the

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[19] Scott Shauf, "Locating the Eunuch. Characterization and Narrative Context in Acts 8:26–40," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*71 (2009): 762-775.

[20] Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 389–91.

[21] Huizing, Russell L. "Identifying Leaders: The African Eunuch as a Model of Christian Leadership." *Neotestamentica* 50, no. 1 (2016): 250

transformative possibilities that follow. The silence regarding the eunuch's subsequent actions is deliberate: Luke knows his audience will implicitly recognize that baptism marks not an endpoint but the beginning of a profound spiritual journey. Through this narrative gap, listeners are invited into active participation, filling the silence with their own understanding of the eunuch's continued faithfulness and witness beyond the baptismal waters.

What Jervell, Dahl, and Shauf all have in common is that they primarily focus on the religious identity, missional strategy, and Luke's authorial intent of the text. However, each of them falls short in identifying Luke's more subtle messages that I believe are just as important. If Luke's only purpose of telling this story was to inspire evangelism, Luke could have chosen a less complex story that went beyond the moment of baptism. Since Luke did not do that, we must grapple with the fullness of the text and not the missional aspect of it that we are most comfortable with.

Jervell, Dahl, and Shauf, like many biblical scholars[22], analyze the eunuch's ethnicity or religious affiliation but ignore or minimize his gender non-conformity, his sexual marginalization, and his social exclusion. Together, these make him not just a Gentile but a sexually, racially, and religiously marginalized figure. The underplay of how radical this inclusion is and the role that the Holy Spirit plays in guiding each of them should not be overlooked.

Beyond its evangelistic implications, Acts 8:36-40 offers a powerful narrative of inclusion. In this passage, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, traditionally regarded

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[22] Abraham Smith, "'Do You Understand What You Are Reading?': A Literary Critical Reading of the Ethiopian (Kushite) Episode (Acts 8:26-40)," in *Afrocentric Interpretations of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Thomas B. Slater (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2015), 48–70.

as an outsider in Jewish society due to his ethnic background and physical condition. Despite these societal barriers, Philip welcomes the eunuch into the fold of Christianity without hesitation or reservation. This act of inclusion extends beyond the mere proclamation of the gospel; it encompasses a radical acceptance of individuals who may be marginalized or ostracized by societal norms.

Furthermore, the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch challenges conventional notions of exclusion within religious communities. By embracing the eunuch as a fellow believer and baptizing him into the faith, Philip exemplifies a model of inclusion that transcends social, cultural, and religious boundaries. This narrative emphasizes the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, regardless of their background, identity, or status. Such radical inclusion shown to the Ethiopian eunuch was transformative enough to bring true joy to him.

In contemporary contexts, Acts 8:36-40 serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of inclusion within religious communities as a spiritual practice, particularly concerning marginalized groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals. Just as Philip welcomed the Ethiopian eunuch into the community of faith, churches should extend a similar embrace to LGBTQIA+ persons, recognizing their inherent value as beloved children of God, created by God, and equally called into fellowship within the community of other believers. This broader understanding of inclusion challenges prevailing attitudes of exclusion and discrimination, inviting all individuals to experience the transformative power of God's love and acceptance.

In contemporary discourse, homosexuality is often perceived as a sin within the majority of Black church communities, leading to a lack of acceptance of LGBTQIA+

individuals in these religious spaces. Nonetheless, churches should welcome and affirm LGBTQIA+ persons as integral members of their congregations. This assertion is supported by the detrimental psychological effects experienced by closeted LGBTQIA+ Christians, the physical unsafety perpetuated by non-affirming cultures, and the historical role of the Black church as a sanctuary for the marginalized and oppressed. In this document I aim to demonstrate why radical inclusion should not be delegated to a specific segment of the church but rather embraced by all believers. Through an analysis of Acts 8:36-40, I will explore the historical context of the scripture, present an exegetical framework supporting this perspective, and ultimately conclude with an argument for the systemic importance of queering the church to dismantle entrenched heteronormativity and whiteness within our religious institutions.

The passage of Acts 8:36-40 occurs within the larger narrative of the Book of Acts, which recounts the early spread of Christianity following the ascension of Jesus Christ. Understanding the historical context surrounding this passage is crucial for interpreting its significance and implications. During the first century, Palestine was under Roman occupation, with the Roman Empire exerting significant influence over political, economic, and social affairs. The region was characterized by a diverse population, including Jews, Greeks, Romans, and various ethnic groups. This cultural diversity contributed to a complex social landscape marked by tensions and interactions among different communities.

The Jewish people, while living under Roman rule, maintained a distinct cultural and religious identity. Judaism played a central role in shaping the social and religious life of the region, with the temple in Jerusalem serving as a focal point for religious

observance and worship. However, the Jewish community was not homogeneous, and various sects and groups held differing interpretations of religious law and practice. In addition to Judaism, the Greco-Roman world of the first century was characterized by the presence of various religious traditions and belief systems. The spread of Hellenistic culture throughout the Mediterranean region resulted in the fusion of Greek and Roman religious practices with local traditions and beliefs.

Christianity emerged within this diverse religious landscape as a distinct movement rooted in Jewish teachings and traditions but open to followers from all backgrounds. This indicates that the early Christians rejected this exclusion and separation between Jew and Gentile. What made Christianity different then the other religious practices of its time, was that it was able to embrace a level of inclusion that others would not. The early Christians faced persecution and opposition from both Jewish authorities and Roman officials, yet their message of salvation through Jesus Christ continued to spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire.

The Ethiopian eunuch mentioned in Acts 8:36-40 occupies a significant role within the narrative of the early Christian church. Eunuchs were individuals who had been castrated, often serving in positions of authority or service within royal courts or households. In ancient Near Eastern societies, eunuchs held diverse roles and statuses, ranging from trusted advisors to servants, depending on the specific cultural context.

The Ethiopian eunuch encountered by Philip likely held a position of prominence within the court of the Ethiopian queen, serving as a high-ranking official responsible for overseeing the queen's treasury. Katherine Ringrose indicates that this Ethiopian Eunuch

is a perfect biblical example of the “perfect servant”.[23] This reference is made to suggest that the eunuch is a third gender made so by castration and distinguished by certain patterns of dress, speech, physiological traits, and overall affect. Katherine Ringrose argues that the eunuch was considered the “perfect servant” not only because of physical or biological distinctiveness, but due to the social and political roles eunuchs were uniquely positioned to fulfill. Because eunuchs were often disowned by their families and incapable of producing biological offspring, they were viewed as individuals without traditional family loyalties or ambitions that could threaten dynastic stability because they were celibate. This lack of kinship ties made them ideal candidates for positions of trust and proximity to rulers, particularly in royal courts and religious institutions, where loyalty and discretion were paramount.[24]

David Hester challenges the traditional view that Matthew 19:12 supports celibacy. The difficulties with the “celibacy” interpretation force us then to reexamine the possibility that Jesus’ saying about the eunuchs is not primarily condemnation of voluntary celibacy, but rather a radical affirmation of those who, in response to his teaching on divorce, choose to remain unmarried, thus making themselves “eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom” by embracing a costly form of fidelity.[25] He argues that eunuchs were not admired as pure or holy people (as some later Christian interpretations suggest). Instead, they were seen as troubling or "transgressive," meaning they broke social and

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[23] Katherine Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

[24] Katherine Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

[25] *John P. Meier, “'Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven' (Mt 19,12),” The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 30, no. 3 (1968): 346–347.*

gender norms. They didn't fit neatly into male or female categories, which made people uncomfortable.[26] Rather than being viewed as holy or asexual, eunuchs were often perceived as sexually excessive, morally weak, and physically ambiguous. Their ambiguous gender status caused social anxiety. Though eunuchs held powerful political roles across empires, they were still deeply mistrusted. Hester explores how masculinity in the ancient world was equated with dominance and sexual penetration; eunuchs, being perceived as penetrable and effeminate, represented the collapse of these ideals.

Ritual castration was a widespread practice among early Christians, especially in monastic and ascetic traditions. Even Church Fathers such as Origen, Melito, and Hilarion either underwent castration or supported it. This practice was deeply influenced by cults like those of Cybele and Attis, where devotees castrated themselves in ecstatic rituals. Hester shows how castration was once seen as a mark of spiritual devotion, not as deviance. Later efforts to suppress this practice had to reinterpret Matthew 19:12 allegorically.[27] Hester describes how the Church gradually moved away from literal castration. By the time of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE), the Church banned voluntary castration among clergy. However, eunuchs continued to hold influential positions in Byzantine and Roman courts, often provoking anxiety among Christian moralists. To combat this, theologians began to allegorize eunuchs as symbols of self-control and moral discipline. The "manly eunuch" was born—a figure who suppresses desire without

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[26] J. David Hester, *"Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19:12 and Transgressive Sexualities"*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, no. 1 (2005): 13, https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X05057772.

[27] J. David Hester, *"Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19:12 and Transgressive Sexualities," Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, no. 1 (2005): 30.

bodily mutilation. This rebranding aligned with Greco-Roman ideals of philosophical restraint.

In his concluding remarks, Hester argues that the traditional, sanitized interpretation of Matthew 19:12, as a metaphor for celibacy or self-control, betrays the radical intent of Jesus' original saying. By invoking the eunuch, Jesus does not reinforce moral restraint but instead disrupts the entire framework of gender and sexual norms upheld by ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman society. Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of shutting the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces while refusing to enter themselves. The eunuch, typically excluded from temple participation under Deuteronomic law (Deut. 23:1), becomes a powerful symbol of irony: those who have historically been barred from sacred spaces are now recast as the very ones entrusted with guarding entry. In this light, the metaphor is not primarily about sexual abstinence or personal piety, but about confronting exclusionary systems and exposing the hypocrisy of self-appointed spiritual gatekeepers.[28] The eunuch becomes a symbol of postgender identity, someone who lives outside binary classifications of male and female, moral and immoral, pure and impure.[29] Hester contends that the Church, in its effort to appeal to patriarchal and heteronormative power structures, reshaped the eunuch into a safe, spiritual figure. This reinterpretation neutered the revolutionary potential of Jesus' words. He challenges modern readers and theologians to reclaim the full weight of the eunuch logion (Greek *logion*, meaning "saying" or "oracle"), not as a call to traditional sexual

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[28] Stephen R. Llewelyn, Gareth J. Wearne, and Bianca L. Sanderson, "Guarding Entry to the Kingdom: The Place of Eunuchs in Mt. 19.12," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10, no. 3 (2012): 243.

[29] J. David Hester, *"Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19:12 and Transgressive Sexualities," Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, no. 1 (2005): 36.

ethics, but as an invitation into radical inclusion and the dismantling of gender hierarchies.[30]

Eunuchs occupied a liminal space within gender and social structures. Their bodies and identities defied binary gender expectations, allowing them to move between masculine and feminine-coded spheres with a degree of flexibility not afforded to others. This gender nonconformity, rather than being seen as purely marginal, often contributed to a sense of mystery and sanctity. Eunuchs were sometimes thought to possess special spiritual insight or access to the divine, which elevated them to positions of religious authority or veneration. In this way, their perceived asexuality and social dislocation made them not only trusted servants but also figures of spiritual significance within Byzantine society. Despite the Ethiopian Eunuch's prestigious position in the queen's court, his status as a eunuch would have marked him as an outsider within Jewish society due to Jewish purity laws and social customs.

The significance of the Ethiopian eunuch's identity lies in his encounter with Philip and his subsequent conversion to Christianity. This encounter represents a pivotal moment in the spread of the gospel beyond the confines of Jewish communities and into the wider Gentile world. By embracing the Ethiopian eunuch as a fellow believer and baptizing him into the faith, Philip demonstrates the inclusivity of the early Christian movement and the transformative power of God's grace. Acts 8:36-40 provides insight into the connection between Philip, a disciple of Jesus Christ, and the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip, who had been appointed as one of the seven deacons in the early Christian

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[30] J. David Hester, *"Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19:12 and Transgressive Sexualities," Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, no. 1 (2005): 36.

community in Jerusalem, was known for his evangelistic zeal and willingness to proclaim the gospel to diverse audiences.

As I've sought to provide a biblical exegesis of this text, I was mindful of exploring the theme of inclusion in both language and actions throughout the literary text. The first indication of inclusion in this text is found in the three words of verse 36, "and they traveled". Walter Brueggemann's "The Prophetic Imagination" presents a robust framework for understanding the role of prophecy in challenging oppressive systems and envisioning a more just and compassionate society[31]. Walking with someone is often metamorphically understood as being in solidarity with another. Regardless of the consequences or condemnation that could have possibly accrued by Philip being seen with this Ethiopian eunuch, Philip decided to stand shoulder to shoulder with him.

Walter Brueggemann writes, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us"[32] According to Brueggemann, the prophetic task goes beyond mere critique of existing societal structures; it involves nurturing, nourishing, and evoking an alternative consciousness and perception that challenges the dominant culture. This alternative consciousness offers a vision of justice, compassion, and liberation that stands in stark contrast to the oppressive systems and ideologies of the status quo.

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[31] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 3.

[32] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 3.

When considering Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch traveling together, we witness the embodiment of Brueggemann's concept of prophetic imagination shown in scripture. Often, in our earnest endeavors to uphold the denominational and religious traditions we cherish, we inadvertently erect barriers that segregate queer individuals onto a separate path of spiritual journeying. These traditions, while often rooted in deep reverence and historical significance, can sometimes become rigid and exclusionary, failing to accommodate the diverse experiences and identities within our communities. As a result, queer individuals may find themselves marginalized, compelled to navigate a distinct road fraught with obstacles and devoid of the fullness of spiritual communion experienced by their non-queer counterparts. This separation perpetuates a sense of otherness and alienation, hindering the inclusive vision of the kingdom of God where all are welcomed and affirmed. Thus, it becomes imperative for religious communities to critically examine and challenge the structures and norms that contribute to this division, striving instead to create pathways that honor the sacred worth and inherent dignity of every individual, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Only through genuine inclusivity and radical hospitality can we dismantle the barriers that segregate and truly embody the love and acceptance modeled by the teachings of Christ.

Moreover, Christians (who are represented by Philip) who are not willing to journey with marginalized individuals are void of “The Politics of Jesus” as described by John Howard Yoder. In John Howard Yoder's "The Politics of Jesus," he emphasizes the radical nature of Jesus' teachings and actions, particularly regarding the Kingdom of God

and the ethic of love.[33] Yoder contends that Jesus' message challenges the political and social structures of his time, advocating for a revolutionary alternative rooted in nonviolence, servanthood, and radical love.

Yoder's perspective on the politics of Jesus sheds light on this passage by highlighting the subversive nature of Philip's actions. In approaching the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip challenges the prevailing social norms and religious customs that would have excluded the eunuch from full participation in the community of faith. By engaging the eunuch in dialogue and baptizing him, Philip embodies Jesus' ethic of inclusivity and love, which transcends barriers of ethnicity, social status, and identity.

Moreover, Yoder's emphasis on nonviolence and servanthood resonates with Philip's approach to evangelism. Rather than imposing his beliefs or coercing the eunuch to convert, Philip demonstrates humility and respect, allowing the eunuch to freely respond to the message of the gospel. This approach reflects Jesus' own ministry, which prioritized compassion, reconciliation, and the empowerment of the marginalized.

Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch not only exemplifies a profound act of inclusion but also highlights his keen ability to discern common ground with the eunuch. The text reveals that the catalyst for their conversation was the eunuch's engagement with the Book of Isaiah the prophet. This intentional observation by Philip served as the basis for initiating dialogue with the eunuch, demonstrating his perceptive and discerning approach to evangelism.

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[33] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 53.

Philip's recognition of the eunuch's engagement with Scripture suggests a shared interest in matters of faith and spirituality, despite their apparent differences in social status and identity. Despite the societal barriers that may have existed between them, Philip was able to identify a point of connection that facilitated meaningful dialogue and engagement. This observation was the driving force that allowed them to walk together and share a common path. For that moment, the two became one. They were in synch, and the motif of the text is blazed with language such as “they” and “both,” indicating the togetherness of the two.

Furthermore, Philip's willingness to engage in conversation with the eunuch despite their differences underscores his commitment to hospitality and inclusivity. Rather than allowing perceived differences to hinder interaction, Philip positioned himself as approachable and open to dialogue, creating a space for the eunuch to freely explore matters of faith and spirituality. It is important to note that Philip never condemned, judged, or requested the eunuch to change or be “born again”. Philip did not serve as a guide, but more as a co-author. By walking with someone and being careful not to try to dictate their path, we allow the creativity of God to merge our experience and create a beautiful ending that we could not have thought or intended.

Furthermore, Philip's willingness to engage in conversation with the eunuch despite their differences underscores his commitment to hospitality and inclusivity. Rather than allowing perceived differences to hinder interaction, Philip positioned himself as approachable and open to dialogue, creating a space for the eunuch to freely explore matters of faith and spirituality.

In essence, this passage illustrates Philip's ability to bridge divides and foster connection through intentional observation and genuine hospitality. His willingness to engage with the eunuch based on a shared interest in Scripture exemplifies the transformative power of inclusion and dialogue in fostering meaningful relationships and facilitating spiritual growth. As contemporary readers, we are challenged to emulate Philip's example by actively seeking points of connection with others and creating welcoming spaces for dialogue and engagement, regardless of perceived differences.

As the narrative unfolds, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch find themselves traveling together and happen upon a body of water. While it was initially Philip who took the initiative to engage the eunuch in conversation, there is a significant shift in agency as the eunuch expresses interest in the water. In verse 36, we witness the eunuch's curiosity and eagerness as he directs his attention towards the water, a pivotal moment that symbolizes his deepening engagement with the Christian faith. Philip's initial interest in the eunuch's spiritual journey catalyzed their encounter, paving the way for meaningful dialogue and companionship along the road. However, it is the eunuch's newfound fascination with the water that signifies a profound internal transformation. This moment represents more than just a physical encounter with a body of water; it encapsulates the eunuch's desire for baptism and acceptance into the Christian community.

What is particularly striking about this shift in focus is the mutual journeying of Philip and the eunuch. While Philip may have initially assumed the role of guide and mentor, the eunuch's interest in the water demonstrates a shared commitment to exploration and discovery. Together, they navigate the complexities of faith and identity, walking side by side on a journey towards spiritual enlightenment. However, although the

eunuch had a clear desire to learn and follow God, he was certain that the religious culture of the time would prevent him. The eunuch asks, “Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” There have been numerous instances where churches have refused to baptize queer individuals or perform their marriages, reflecting ongoing debates within religious communities regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion.

The Southern Baptist Convention, a conservative evangelical denomination, maintains a traditional interpretation of Scripture that views homosexuality as sinful. As a result, many SBC-affiliated churches adhere to strict policies against baptizing LGBTQ+ individuals or officiating same-sex marriages. The United Methodist Church, one of the largest mainline Protestant denominations globally, has faced internal division over its official stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion. The UMC's Book of Discipline in 2016, before it was later modified in its 2020 – 2024 Book of Discipline that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" and prohibits the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy and the celebration of same-sex marriages. [34] While the 2020 – 2024 Book of Discipline still does not affirm LGBTQ+ people, it does outline a moratorium that formally pauses any judicial proceedings related to issues of human sexuality.[35] This policy has led to significant controversy and resistance within the denomination, yet in many spaces it is fully supported and encouraged.

The Catholic Church, under the leadership of Pope Francis, holds that homosexual acts are sinful but calls for compassion and pastoral care towards LGBTQ+

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[34] *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2016 (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016).

[35] The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2024* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2024), 2702, 778.

individuals. However, the Church's official teachings do not recognize same-sex marriage or affirm LGBTQ+ relationships. In 2023, Pope Francis gave priests the right to bless same sex couples. This effort was to aid the church in making a radical shift to becoming more inclusive. Consequently, many Catholic parishes adhere to these teachings and may refuse to baptize or marry LGBTQ+ individuals. Lastly, many conservative evangelical churches, particularly those affiliated with organizations like the Southern Baptist Convention or the Assemblies of God, maintain traditional interpretations of Scripture that condemn homosexuality as sinful. As a result, LGBTQ+ individuals may face discrimination or exclusion from sacraments such as baptism or marriage within these communities.

The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:36-40 resonates deeply with the experiences of queer individuals who have felt marginalized or excluded by religious institutions. Like many queer individuals, the Ethiopian eunuch understood the longing to connect with God but faced rejection and exclusion from the religious establishment due to his identity as a eunuch. His experience of being outcasted by the religious system parallels the struggles faced by many queer individuals who have been denied acceptance and affirmation within their faith communities.

When Philip heard the Ethiopian eunuch express his desire to be baptized, it resonated deeply within him. He recognized the eunuch's longing for spiritual connection and the unjust barriers preventing him from fully participating in the religious community. In verse 38, Philip's response is immediate and decisive. Without directly answering the eunuch's question, Philip perceives the systemic oppression at play and acts. He commands the chariot to stop, signaling his refusal to allow the eunuch's

exclusion to continue unchallenged. Furthermore, this pivotal moment in the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch serves as a profound lesson for both clergy and justice seekers. Philip's decisive action of ordering the chariot to stop carries with it a charge to all who seek to dismantle systems of oppression and promote inclusivity within religious communities. It highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing the barriers that hinder marginalized individuals from fully participating in the life of the church.

In halting the chariot, Philip not only refuses to allow the eunuch's exclusion to continue unchallenged but also sends a clear message to other clergy and justice seekers: progress cannot be made if those traveling together feel stunted or left behind. This charge speaks to the collective responsibility of religious leaders and advocates to ensure that no individual is left on the margins, excluded from the blessings of community and belonging. By taking action to address the eunuch's exclusion, Philip demonstrates the transformative power of solidarity and allyship. His example challenges clergy and justice seekers to actively confront injustice and create spaces of belonging where all individuals are valued and affirmed. In doing so, they move closer to realizing the vision of a church that embodies the radical inclusivity and love exemplified by Jesus Christ. This moment encapsulates the intersection of individual longing and systemic injustice. The eunuch's desire for baptism reflects his deep spiritual hunger and his willingness to defy societal norms to pursue a relationship with God. Meanwhile, Philip's response underscores his commitment to justice and inclusivity. By halting the chariot, Philip disrupts the cycle of oppression and asserts the eunuch's inherent worth and dignity as a beloved child of God.

Let's delve into the concept of justice as demonstrated in Philip's intentional act of baptizing the Ethiopian Eunuch. This act, imbued with the power and authority vested in Philip, serves as a profound symbol of liberation from oppression. Rather than prioritizing the need to assert doctrinal correctness or theological supremacy, Philip's primary concern lies in alleviating the eunuch from the burdens of societal exclusion and systemic injustice.

The significance of this act lies in its embodiment of a broader principle: that liberation from oppression holds greater value than mere intellectual victory. Often, our interactions within religious contexts become consumed with the desire to persuade others to adopt our own beliefs, leading us to overlook the systemic injustices and forms of oppression that persist within our communities. In his seminal work, "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," Ludwig Wittgenstein reminds us that philosophy is not merely a static body of doctrine but an active pursuit—an ongoing engagement with ideas and their practical implications.[36] Similarly, our Christian faith should not be constrained by rigid doctrinal frameworks but should instead manifest as a dynamic force for justice and compassion in the world.

Philip's actions exemplify this dynamic understanding of faith. By prioritizing the liberation of the Ethiopian Eunuch over doctrinal correctness, Philip demonstrates a commitment to the active pursuit of justice and equity. This challenges us to reassess our own approach to faith and action, encouraging us to move beyond mere adherence to doctrine towards a more transformative engagement with the world around us.

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[36] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 4.112.

In practical terms, this means redirecting our energies towards identifying and addressing the systemic injustices that perpetuate oppression within our communities through using our religion as a form of liberation and not a form of intolerance. Rather than seeking to impose our beliefs on others, we are called to actively dismantle structures of oppression and alleviate the suffering of those marginalized by society and various forms of religious traditions and beliefs. This requires a shift in focus—from doctrinal debates to tangible acts of solidarity, advocacy, and social change. Justice does not seek to be right; it is a constant drive to do right.

Expanding on the continuous presence of Philip alongside the Ethiopian eunuch throughout their interaction reveals a profound motif of unity and solidarity within the narrative. Despite the cultural barriers and societal norms that might have dictated otherwise, Philip remains unwaveringly committed to accompanying the eunuch on his spiritual journey.

Scripture underscores this motif of unity by highlighting Philip's consistent presence alongside the Ethiopian eunuch. From their initial encounter on the road to Gaza to the pivotal moment of baptism, Philip never leaves the eunuch's side. This intentional act of solidarity challenges prevailing notions of exclusion and marginalization, affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, regardless of societal status or identity.

The significance of this unity is further emphasized by the description of Philip going down into the water with the Ethiopian eunuch during the baptismal ceremony. Unlike the baptism of Jesus by John in Matthew 3:16, where Jesus is depicted as going down and emerging alone, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch suggests a shared

experience of immersion and emergence. This symbolic act of unity symbolizes a shared commitment to faith and spiritual transformation, transcending cultural barriers and societal norms. Moreover, the use of the Greek word "katabainō" (καταβαίνω) to describe Philip and the eunuch going down together into the water carries significant theological implications. This word conveys a sense of mutual descent, emphasizing the shared experience of baptism and the deep bond between Philip and the eunuch. Katabainō implies that the two descended together. To journey with someone through life, you must share in their experiences. Going down with the Eunuch, for Philip, was an act of selflessness and humility.

Following the baptismal rite, the presence of the Holy Spirit is explicitly acknowledged for the first time in their encounter. While the Holy Spirit is inherently omnipresent, its manifestation at this particular juncture marks a profound shift in the eunuch's journey of faith. The recognition of the Holy Spirit's presence following baptism carries profound theological significance. It suggests a deeper level of spiritual awakening and dependence for the Ethiopian eunuch, who may have previously relied on Philip for guidance and understanding. With the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him, the eunuch experiences a newfound sense of clarity, direction, and empowerment.

Prior to receiving the Holy Spirit, the eunuch may have looked to Philip as a source of knowledge and answers to his questions. However, with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, he is now equipped with divine wisdom and insight. The Holy Spirit becomes his guide and counselor, illuminating the path ahead and providing him with the clarity and understanding he seeks. This moment underscores the transformative power of baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. It speaks to the

profound change that occurs within individuals as they are initiated into the Christian community and filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit. For the Ethiopian eunuch, this experience marks a pivotal moment of spiritual liberation and empowerment, as he transitions from reliance on human wisdom to dependence on the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit.

For the Ethiopian eunuch, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him signifies a profound shift in his spiritual journey. No longer reliant solely on human wisdom or external guidance, he now possesses the internal guidance of the Holy Spirit, who provides him with clarity, direction, and insight. This newfound reliance on the Holy Spirit reflects a deeper level of faith and dependence on God's divine presence and guidance. In a broader theological sense, this moment also highlights the universal availability of the Holy Spirit to all believers, regardless of their social status, ethnicity, or background. The Ethiopian eunuch, who may have been marginalized and excluded by society, is welcomed into the fullness of the Christian faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This serves as a powerful reminder of God's inclusive love and the transformative power of the gospel to break down barriers and bring about reconciliation and unity.

The baptism that occurred between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch serves as a vivid illustration of the Holy Spirit's capacity to awaken self-awareness within believers. Baptism affects relationships and is vitally important when dealing with a marginalized context because it gives the person a right to family.[37] In most cases, this act invites them into a spiritual family when their biological family often rejected them. Through the

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[37] Jodamus, Johnathan, Paulo Ueti, and Sarojini Nadar. “Toward Gender Justice: Reimagining Religion, Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Acts 8:26–40.” *The Ecumenical Review* 75, no. 1 (2023): 106.

descent of the Holy Spirit upon the eunuch, we witness a profound moment of spiritual awakening, a recognition of his inherent worth and dignity as a beloved child of God. This awakening goes beyond mere intellectual understanding; it is a deeply existential realization of one's identity and purpose in relation to God. Howard Thurman's teachings in "Jesus and the Disinherited" resonate deeply in this context, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness for marginalized communities. The Holy Spirit invites individuals to reclaim their dignity and agency in the face of societal marginalization, empowering them to assert their humanity and resist the dehumanizing forces of oppression.

In addition to awakening self-awareness, the Holy Spirit serves as a source of divine knowledge and wisdom, guiding believers through life's journey with clarity and insight. Unlike relying solely on human wisdom or external guidance, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit empowers individuals to discern God's will and direction for their lives. This knowledge and wisdom are not merely intellectual but deeply spiritual, enabling believers to navigate the complexities of life with confidence and assurance. Thurman's emphasis on spiritual discernment as essential for marginalized communities resonates deeply here, highlighting the transformative power of the Holy Spirit to provide guidance and strength in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit empowers believers to transcend religious traditions and embrace a deeper, more authentic relationship with God. The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch challenges traditional religious norms and practices, as the eunuch experiences a profound encounter with God through the Holy Spirit. This liberation from religious traditions signifies a shift from external forms of religion to an

inward spirituality rooted in freedom and authenticity. Drawing upon texts that advocate for the inclusion of queer people of faith, we understand that true spirituality transcends external religious practices and rituals, encompassing a deep, personal relationship with the divine. The Holy Spirit invites believers to move beyond the confines of religious traditions and embrace a spirituality that is authentic, liberating, and transformative.

In conclusion, this study and insight will assist in my Doctor of Ministry project as the profound narrative of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, as depicted in Acts 8:36-40, not only recounts a historical moment of inclusive evangelism but also serves as a compelling blueprint for modern religious communities, especially within the Black church, regarding the acceptance and affirmation of LGBTQIA+ individuals. This account transcends the traditional boundaries of evangelistic outreach, extending a radical invitation to inclusivity that challenges contemporary faith communities to reevaluate and dismantle the entrenched barriers of exclusion and discrimination.

The significance of this narrative lies in its demonstration of unconditional acceptance and the celebration of diversity within the context of faith—a principle that is both revolutionary and deeply resonant with the historical role of the Black church as a sanctuary for the marginalized and oppressed. The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch embodies a model of community that the Black church, and indeed all churches, are called to emulate: one where love, acceptance, and the recognition of every individual's inherent worth are paramount.

By revisiting and embracing the ethos of inclusivity and acceptance exemplified by Philip's interaction with the Ethiopian Eunuch, churches today are invited to participate in a transformative process. This process not only involves affirming

LGBTQIA+ individuals as integral members of their congregations but also actively engaging in the dismantling of systemic heteronormativity and whiteness that have historically marginalized these individuals. In doing so, churches can reclaim their prophetic voice, serving as beacons of justice, love, and radical inclusion in a world fraught with division and exclusion.

Furthermore, the narrative challenges religious communities to reflect on the nature of their hospitality and the depth of their commitment to embracing all individuals, irrespective of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other characteristic that has been used to justify exclusion. It underscores the importance of walking alongside each other, in solidarity and love, recognizing the divine image in every person and affirming their place within the body of believers. When the church chooses to isolate LGBTQ+ individuals, it inadvertently asserts a narrative that places human understanding and doctrine above the infinite wisdom and inclusivity of God. This action, often justified by traditional interpretations of scripture and personal convictions, overlooks a fundamental truth of faith: God's omnipotence and omniscience enable Him to use anyone for His purposes, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Inclusion, therefore, is not merely a social or political stance but an act of profound faith, rooted in the conviction that God makes no mistakes and is capable of dwelling within and working through every person.

To exclude LGBTQ+ individuals from the life of the church is to forget that God’s ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9). It is to limit the limitless, to constrain the uncontainable. Such exclusion does not protect the sanctity of the church; rather, it reveals a lack of trust in God's sovereignty and His ability

to transform lives. By placing our personal phobias and interpretations above God's capacity to use all of His creation, we not only diminish the church's witness to the transformative power of God's love but also, and more tragically, we attempt to place limits on the Holy Spirit's movement.

Inclusion as an act of faith trusts that God's presence and power transcend human boundaries and doctrines. This faith acknowledges that each person, created in the image of God, carries within them the potential to reflect God's love, serve His purposes, and contribute uniquely to the body of Christ. It understands that the Spirit of God, who hovered over the waters of creation, who filled the tabernacle, and who descended upon the early church at Pentecost, is the same Spirit that moves within and among LGBTQ+ individuals today.

Moreover, when we sideline certain groups based on a narrow interpretation of scripture, we forget the breadth of God's narrative of redemption and love that is inclusive of all humanity. The gospel of Jesus Christ, after all, is not a message of exclusion but one of radical inclusion, where barriers are broken down, and all are welcomed into God's family. It is a message that Jesus himself lived out, reaching out to those on the margins of society, engaging with those whom the religious elite deemed unworthy.

By embracing inclusion, the church can become a true reflection of the kingdom of God, where diversity is celebrated, and unity is found in our shared identity as children of God. This requires a humility to recognize that we do not have all the answers and a faith that trusts God's ability to work in and through every life. It requires a commitment to see beyond our prejudices and fears, to see each person as a vessel of God's Spirit.

In the end, inclusion is not just about opening the doors of the church wider; it's about recognizing that those doors were never meant to be closed. It's about understanding that when we allow our fears and prejudices to dictate our actions, we are not protecting the integrity of the church but obscuring the very heart of the gospel. True faith rests in the assurance that God is at work in ways we might not understand, through people we might not expect, and for purposes that fulfill His will and demonstrate His love to all creation. By embracing this faith, the church can move closer to being the body of Christ in its fullest expression—diverse, inclusive, and united in love.

In essence, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is not merely a historical account to be admired from afar but a call to action. It beckons churches, especially those within the Black community, to lead in exemplifying a faith that is inclusive, affirming, and reflective of the radical love of Jesus Christ. By doing so, churches can become true sanctuaries for all, embodying the transformative power of a gospel that recognizes and celebrates the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. In this commitment to inclusivity and love, the church can fulfill its calling as a refuge for the marginalized and a force for societal change, embodying the very essence of the gospel it proclaims.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Arguably, the darkest periods of modern history have been the lynching of Black people in America[1], American Colonialism[2], and the Nazi Germany mass genocide of Jewish people and homosexuals[3] through concentration camps and conversion therapy. Modern history is often considered to have started around the late 15th century, following the Middle Ages. This period is marked by the beginning of the Renaissance in Europe. This period also includes the Age of Discovery (or Exploration), when European powers explored and colonized much of the world, and the subsequent rise of colonial empires. We also saw the start of various Enlightenment movements in modern history, which fostered new philosophical ideas about liberty, democracy, and individual rights. Although many philosophers and thought leaders gave way to intellectual movements that would inspire significant change in various spheres of human society, some interested thinkers birthed inhumane periods.

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[1] Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 123.

[2] Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Viking, 2001).

[3] Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War: How the Nazis Led Germany from Conquest to Disaster* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

One of the dark thoughts that came out of the period of enlightenment during modern history was Conversion therapy.[4] Conversion therapy, also known as reparative therapy, is defined by the Human Rights Campaign[5] as a range of dangerous and discredited practices that falsely claim to change a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. Originating in 1899 by German psychiatrist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing as a medical treatment to 'cure' homosexuality, this practice was co-opted and implemented during the Nazi regime in Germany, leading to the systematic persecution and incarceration of homosexuals in concentration camps.

Supported tacitly and explicitly by the predominantly Christian communities across Adolf Hitler's Germany, Schrenck-Notzing's method, which lacked peer review research, unknowingly laid the groundwork for a phenomenon that would later be known as "conversion therapy" in an already homophobic culture. It is undeniable that the general attitudes and stigma around homosexuality in Germany[6] made it possible for such scientifically unproven methods of "conversion therapy to exist. Although Schrenck-Notzing's died before the Nazis rose to power, many of the same ideologies that were birthed to conversion therapy also gave birth to the widespread assaults on homosexuals in Germany. There was no room for homosexuality to exist in the Greater German Reich that Hitler wanted to establish. Hitler sought to control every aspect of German life

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[4] Whitney Strub, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[5] Human Rights Campaign, "The Lies and Dangers of Efforts to Change Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity," accessed May 5, 2025, https://www.hrc.org/resources/the-lies-and-dangers-of-reparative-therapy.:contentReference[oaicite:6]{index=6}.

[6] Richard Plant, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War Against Homosexuals* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 63.

through the establishment of a totalitarian state. This involved the suppression of opposition, the control of media and culture, and the creation of a cult of personality around himself. Central to Hitler's ideology was the belief in the superiority of the "Aryan" race and the need to maintain its purity. This belief led to the systemic persecution and extermination of groups he deemed racially inferior or undesirable, including Jews, Romani people, disabled individuals, and others, culminating in the Holocaust.

The Holocaust was a systematic campaign of racial cleansing orchestrated by Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime,[7] aiming to exterminate entire groups deemed "racially inferior" according to their perverse ideology of establishing a superior society. This genocidal policy led to the mass murder of six million Jews, alongside millions of others, including Romani people, disabled individuals, Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, and homosexuals. The Holocaust stands as a grim testament to the dangers of unchecked hatred, bigotry, and authoritarianism, serving as a stark reminder of the need for vigilance against such ideologies to prevent future atrocities. Due to the risk of death and possible victimization under the Nazi regime, some homosexuals would feel pressured to do whatever they could to cure themselves of their homosexual desires and tendencies. Although, for some, conversion therapy in Hitler's Germany was cruel, other same-gender loving persons within Hitler's regime welcomed it because they saw it as the only possible option to escape the certainty of death was to come if they remained practicing homosexuals.

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[7] Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews: 1933–1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986).

Historian Elise Chenier points out that while proponents of aversion therapy during the mid-20th century claimed "cure" rates as high as fifty percent for homosexuality[8], these assertions lacked robust documentation and were not substantiated by credible scientific evidence. In contrast, Sigmund Freud,[9] widely regarded as the father of psychoanalysis, was generally skeptical about the potential to "cure" homosexuality, viewing it not as an illness but as a variation of sexual orientation. Despite Freud's more tolerant stance, societal stigma against homosexuality remained exceptionally high, especially during critical historical moments such as 1933, when Adolf Hitler rose to power as Chancellor of Germany. Under Nazi rule, the pressure to conform to strict and oppressive societal norms dramatically increased. Homosexuals, among others, found themselves targeted by the regime's harsh policies, which aimed to align the personal lives of the German people with Hitler's vision of an ideologically and racially "pure" nation.

This period underscored a dark chapter in the history of conversion therapy and the treatment of homosexuals. Many individuals were coerced into therapies that promised normalization but delivered trauma instead. The Nazi ideology and its policies not only enforced rigid conformity but also instigated widespread persecution of various marginalized groups, embedding a legacy of fear and suppression that would affect countless lives. Understanding that stigma is a powerful mechanism, supporters of conversion therapy did not consider how the effects of stigma were affecting their

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[8] Erin Blakemore, "The Disturbing History of Gay Conversion Therapy," *History*, last modified October 15, 2019, https://www.history.com/news/gay-conversion-therapy-origins-19th-century.

[9] Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988).

"success" cases. To better understand this time's social and religious stigma, we must explore what it was like to live in Germany during this time.

Before the rise of the Nazis, Berlin was not only the political capital of Germany but also an international hub of gay culture, often regarded as the "gay capital of the world".[10] During the Weimar Republic era (1918 – 1933), the city became a vibrant center for the LGBTQ+ community. Germany saw various leadership types, and each of these leaders led differently; German Empire (1871–1918), the Weimar Republic (1918–1933), and the Nazi regime (1933–1945). Before the Nazi regime, people from major cities across the world, such as New York, Paris, and London, traveled to Berlin to experience and participate in a society that boasted a relatively high level of tolerance towards diverse sexual orientations and identities. Clubs like the El Dorado, which operated around 1929, epitomized this openness, providing safe spaces for gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals to socialize and express themselves freely. However, this period of cultural liberalism coexisted with legal contradictions. Despite the social progressiveness in urban centers like Berlin, Germany maintained a restrictive national law known as Paragraph 175, which criminalized homosexual acts between men (the law did not mention women). Enacted in 1871, Paragraph 175 was infrequently enforced during the Weimar years but remained a legal tool that could be and was occasionally used against the LGBTQ+ community. The 1871 version of Paragraph 175 reads, "Unnatural sexual acts committed between persons of the male sex, or by humans with animals, is punishable with imprisonment; a loss of civil rights may also be sentenced."

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[10] Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 5.

This law was cemented into Germany's criminal code, but before Hitler's rise to power, German authorities could rarely act on this law because German courts narrowly followed this law. The courts would often specify that the alleged must be caught in "unnatural sexual acts." Speculation or perception that one was committing "unnatural sexual acts" would not hold up in court. This made it difficult for authorities to bring charges against someone under Paragraph 175. The only way to prove this is a policeman had to catch two men in the act of having sexual intercourse. Women, under paragraph 175, were not explicitly targeted.

Before rising to power, Hitler and his fellow Nazi leaders vocally criticized the Weimar Republic's culture as overly decadent and morally corrupt. This criticism included strong disapproval of the period's liberal attitudes towards sexuality, which was evident in the visibility and somewhat acceptance of gay communities and Berlin becoming a central hub for LGBTQ+ people to gather from all over the world. This, to Hitler and his party, was a stain against the purity of his society, and he despised the seeming acceptance that others were having towards a community that he thought weakened the strength and threatened the future of their race. Key figures in the Nazi party, such as Alfred Rosenberg and Heinrich Himmler, expressed overt homophobic sentiments. Nonetheless, public discussions on homosexuality by Hitler and other top Nazis were rare, and such issues were notably absent from the Nazi Party's 1920 platform, which instead emphasized the creation of a Greater German state, anti-Semitic policies, and economic reforms.

Legally, the Nazi Party resisted any efforts to decriminalize sexual relations between men, maintaining a staunch opposition to repealing Paragraph 175 of the

German criminal code. During parliamentary debates, they argued that male homosexual relationships were a dangerous vice that threatened the destruction of German society, advocating for even harsher penalties than those existing in the law at the time. Within the Nazi Party, attitudes towards homosexuality were not uniformly rigid. There was some variation and uncertainty among both leaders and the rank. Ernst Röhm, a prominent member of the party and leader of the SA (Sturmabteilung or Stormtroopers), a key Nazi paramilitary group, was openly gay. Röhm described himself using the term "gleichgeschlechtlich," meaning same-sex oriented and did not see his sexual orientation as conflicting with Nazi ideology or his leadership role. Contrary to promoting liberal democratic values or tolerance, Röhm viewed legalizing relations between men as a means to challenge and overturn conventional moral standards. He criticized the reserve of some Nazis, which he did not regard as genuinely revolutionary.

Röhm's homosexuality became a public issue in 1931 when a newspaper revealed his orientation, which was then used against the Nazi Party by the Social Democratic Party in their election propaganda. Despite this, Hitler stood by Röhm, allowing him to retain his leadership position in the SA until 1934 when Röhm was murdered during the Night of the Long Knives, a purge that consolidated Hitler's power. Also known as the Röhm Purge, this major event occurred between June 30 and July 2, 1934. During this period, Hitler, along with the top leadership of the Nazi Party, orchestrated a series of political executions intended to consolidate his power and eliminate potential threats within the party itself. Röhm stance on homosexuality and the public now being aware of his homosexual attractions made Röhm a clear threat to the new order that Hitler was now determined to set. Regardless of Hilter's past support of Röhm, Röhm's presence in

the Nazi leadership did little to soften the party's overall harsh stance against homosexuality and the broader gay community.

Once Hitler came to power as Chancellor in 1933 for the first two and half years in power, the Nazi regime narrowly enforced Paragraph 175 much like it did before their regime came to power. However, consistent with his party's harsh criticism towards the former government, they oppressed the LGBTQ+ community in other ways without initially changing laws and targeting Paragraph 175. The Nazi regime moved quickly to dismantle the vibrant and visible gay cultures that had flourished during the Weimar Republic. One of their initial measures targeting the gay community involved shutting down gay bars and other social venues that had served as crucial meeting spots for the LGBTQ+ community. Following a directive from the Nazis, the Berlin police initiated a wave of closures of known gay establishments. Among the venues closed was the El Dorado, the nightclub that had become an iconic symbol of Berlin's thriving gay scene. It was celebrated for its inclusive atmosphere and dazzling performances that drove thousands of gay men from other countries to dance on its floors. These shutdowns were just the beginning of Hitler's show of totalitarian strength to build a society that he had long envisioned.

The Nazis would continue to target Germany's gay community by shutting down gay publications and associations, including a notable raid on Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute for Sexual Sciences in May 1933.[11] The Institute was a research facility and

[11] Heinz Heger, *The Men with the Pink Triangle*, trans. David Fernbach (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1994).

served as a cultural center and a haven for the LGBTQ+ community.[12] It housed an extensive library and archives, offered educational services and medical consultations, and even issued certificates to transgender individuals to help them avoid arrest under laws criminalizing cross-dressing. When the Nazis came to power, they immediately targeted Hirschfeld's Institute because it symbolized the Weimar Republic's era of relative sexual liberalism and because it contradicted Nazi ideals of racial and sexual purity. This raid led to the destruction of significant research and literature during widespread book burnings targeting dissenting voices. The crackdown escalated with new police tactics and laws allowing for the detention of individuals based on prior sexual crime convictions, as defined under Paragraphs 173-183 of the German criminal code. By the fall of 1934, efforts were intensified by instructing local police to compile lists of men suspected of same-sex activities, marking a systematic approach to persecuting homosexuals. This list was known as the “Pink List”. This name did not officially know these lists during the Nazi era but has been labeled as such by historians to describe their function and content. The term "pink"[13] comes from the pink triangle that homosexuals were required to wear in Nazi concentration camps as a means of identification. These actions were part of the Nazi agenda to enforce their ideology of moral purity, foreshadowing even harsher measures in the late 1930s.

After having a firm grip on the pulse of Germany, which had now been gripped with fear by the murder of leftist political leaders and the brutal treatment of gays in the

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[12] Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 275.

[13] Heinz Heger, *The Men with the Pink Triangle*, trans. David Fernbach (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1994), 27.

country, Hitler was now ready to revise Paragraph 175. On June 28, 1935, Nazi judges amended Paragraph 175, which would now read, “A man who commits sexual acts (*Unzucht*) with another man, or allows himself to be misused for sexual acts by a man, will be punished with prison.” The goal of this new language was to prohibit the courts from narrowly deciding on this law, opening it up to a broader array of interpretations. Notably, the Nazis removed the word “unnatural” from their version because courts were using this word to represent sexual activity between two men explicitly. Intentionally omitting “unnatural” from the law allowed the regime to charge persons for a more comprehensive array of sexual actions and behaviors. The government could now finally not have to catch someone in the act of having sexual activity. Still, they could now include gestures such as touching, steering, or presenting “unmanly” to be found guilty of this offense.

After Paragraph 175 was amended, persecution intensified against homosexuals living under Hitler’s regime. The revised version of Paragraph 175 under the Nazi regime introduced two additional sections, 175(a) and 175(b), to intensify the criminalization of homosexual acts.

Section 175(a) specified four behaviors that were considered particularly severe violations:

A man is coercing another man into sexual activity.

A man initiating sexual relations with a male subordinate or employee.

A man having sexual relations with a male minor (defined as under 21 years of age).

A man is engaging in prostitution with another man.

The Nazis viewed these acts as especially corruptive because they involved the perceived corruption or exploitation of other men. Under 175(a), those found guilty could face up to ten years of hard labor, a notably severe punishment in the context of the German criminal justice system. Notably, both parties involved in these acts could be penalized, which differed from the treatment of similar heterosexual acts where typically only the instigator was charged, and the sentences were generally less severe.

Section 175(b) addressed the crime of bestiality, which was prohibited for both men and women. This section continued the existing ban but was incorporated into the broader framework of laws aimed at enforcing moral standards under Nazi rule. These amendments to Paragraph 175 were part of the broader Nazi effort to enforce their rigid ideology of social and racial purity, using the criminal code to penalize behaviors they deemed undesirable harshly. An estimated 15,000 homosexuals were killed in Hitler's concentration camps. The majority of gay prisoners succumbed, frequently due to exhaustion. Numerous were forcibly castrated, and others endured horrific medical experiments to "cure" them of homosexuality. There were also mass executions specifically targeting gay detainees, resulting in the deaths of hundreds in single incidents. Although the treatment in Germany for homosexuals was harsh and cruel, this was a continuation of the widely accepted harsh treatment towards members of the homosexual community.

In 1533, under the reign of Henry VIII, the English Parliament enacted the first law against homosexuality, marking it as a capital felony to commit "buggery with mankind or beast." This law, deeply rooted in religious terminology like "vice," "abominable," and "buggery," underwent several revisions, repeals, and reinstatements. It

was solidified again in 1563 under Queen Elizabeth, persisting in this form until 1861, when the death penalty was replaced with life imprisonment, illustrating the strong influence of theological and biblical perspectives.

Centuries later, on July 4, 1776, the United States was founded with the declaration of independence by the 13 original colonies, presenting itself as a refuge from tyranny and oppression. This founding aimed to provide sanctuary for those fleeing religious and political persecution. However, the societal and legal acceptance of homosexuals did not align with this principle of refuge. At the time of its founding, each of the 13 colonies had laws that mandated the death penalty for male homosexuals, reflecting a harsh stance similar to earlier English laws.[14] Only one colony applied this extreme sentence to a woman found guilty of lesbian acts.

This pattern of discrimination and criminalization of homosexuality was not unique to the United States or England. Still, it was a commonality across many Western countries, including those under the control of Hitler's Germany. There, the persecution was part of a broader ideology that saw homosexuals as deviants needing to be excluded or eliminated from society, a tragic reflection of a widespread lack of acceptance that transcended borders and eras.

Before the American Revolution, the legal approach to homosexuality differed significantly between the northern and southern colonies. Following Virginia's example, in the South, colonies either adhered directly to English law without formally adopting it into their statutes or incorporated it word-for-word, as in South Carolina's case. In

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[14] David A. J. Richards, *The Sodomy Cases: Bowers v. Hardwick and Lawrence v. Texas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 3, 17.

contrast, the northern colonies, influenced by Puritan beliefs, developed a distinct legal style.

This Puritan influence was particularly evident in Connecticut's Laws of 1672, which were introduced to emphasize the need for laws based on divine guidance, similar to those given to the Israelites in the Old Testament. The first set of capital laws, which included crimes like treason, murder, witchcraft, arson, sodomy, rape, bestiality, adultery, and buggery, was established in Plymouth Colony in 1636. Offenders of these laws were liable to receive the death penalty.

Interestingly, Massachusetts requested Reverend John Cotton to draft fundamental laws in the same year. Cotton's proposal notably equated lesbianism with male homosexuality as a capital offense, diverging from the English law, which only addressed male homosexual acts and bestiality, not lesbianism. This reflects broader interpretations from church canonists who, influenced by Roman law, considered lesbian acts deserving of capital punishment, as evidenced by historical executions in France and Italy.

However, Cotton's recommendations were not adopted. Instead, the Bay Colony in 1641 implemented the Body of Laws and Liberties, which included 12 capital offenses, among them sodomy. These laws, which were intended to create a bible based Commonwealth, did not follow the English model but rather the biblical language of Leviticus. The law explicitly stated that if a man lies with another as with a woman, both should be put to death. This wording remained in effect in Connecticut for over 46 years after the Declaration of Independence, underscoring the deep-rooted religious influences on American legal foundations.

The legislative picture was the same for New York as well. The colony of New York had developed a sodomy statue that was identical to the Leviticus biblical account. The code clearly stated, “If any man lyeth with mankind as he lieth with a woman, they shall be put to Death, unless one party was forced, or under Fourteen years of age, in which case he shall be punished at the discretion of the Court Assizes. For more than two centuries, America gradually moved away from imposing the death penalty for homosexuality. This slow shift significantly changed how the legal system treated such cases.

Initially, the laws in the 13 original colonies were harsh. For instance, on March 18, 1796, New Jersey enacted a law that sentenced individuals convicted of sodomy to up to twenty-one years of solitary confinement with hard labor. Shortly after, New York, on March 26, 1796, modified its criminal laws to abolish the death penalty for all crimes except treason and murder, replacing it with life imprisonment for other severe offenses, including sodomy. Rhode Island in 1798 instituted severe public humiliation for sodomy; first-time offenders were displayed on the gallows before being imprisoned, while repeat offenders faced execution.

Virginia, in 1800, amended its laws to reduce penalties for felonies, including sodomy, to prison terms ranging from one to ten years. However, enslaved individuals were still subject to the death penalty under these laws. By 1805, Massachusetts had also adjusted its approach, setting the maximum imprisonment for sodomy at ten years. This trend continued with Maryland and New Hampshire adopting similar sentencing ranges in 1809 and 1812, respectively. Meanwhile, Georgia in 1816 imposed life imprisonment for sodomy, showing the variability in how seriously different states viewed the crime.

Delaware's 1826 law prescribed up to three years of solitary confinement and public whipping for sodomy. Despite these changes, the Carolinas remained notably conservative. North Carolina maintained the death penalty for sodomy until 1869, replacing it with a prison term of five to sixty years. South Carolina held on to its death penalty statutes the longest, only abolishing them in 1873, twelve years after England had done so, and replacing them with up to five years of imprisonment.

Thus, by the late 19th century, the death penalty for homosexuality was phased out across the United States, reflecting a gradual, albeit inconsistent, shift towards less severe penalties. Historical records show that the enforcement of capital punishment for sodomy was rare but did occur. Notable cases include William Cornish in Virginia in 1625 and William Plain in Connecticut in 1646. Additionally, in what was then Dutch New Amsterdam, harsh penalties like burning at the stake and drowning were carried out for sexual relations with minors in the mid-17th century.

This move away from capital punishment marked an essential, though slow, progress in the legal treatment of homosexual acts in America. It mirrored the broader societal shift towards a somewhat more lenient view of moral offenses, driven by changing attitudes towards individual rights and the beginnings of recognizing personal privacy. Despite these advances, other severe penalties persisted, such as lengthy prison sentences, forced labor, and other cruel forms of corporal punishment, which continued to reflect a societal intent to punish and stigmatize homosexual behavior.

The evolution of these laws did not occur in isolation but was part of a broader wave of reform affecting various aspects of criminal justice and social norms. Activists, intellectuals, and even some politicians began to challenge traditional views on different

moral and ethical issues, arguing for more humane and just treatments. This period also saw the rise of the first movements advocating for the rights and recognition of homosexual individuals, although they faced immense opposition and often severe repercussions.

As the 20th century approached, the impact of these legal changes began to manifest more broadly. The removal of the death penalty for sodomy, while a significant legal shift, did not eliminate the cultural and societal prejudices that prompted such laws in the first place. Homosexuality remained criminalized in many areas, and the social stigma associated with it persisted well into the 20th century, affecting the lives of countless individuals. These historical legacies underscore the complexities of progress and the deep-seated resistance to change, highlighting the ongoing struggle for rights and acceptance faced by the LGBTQ+ community.

Moreover, the reflection on the historical enforcement of these laws provides a stark reminder of the brutal ways societies have often dealt with differences and how legal frameworks can reflect and reinforce prevailing social prejudices. It illustrates the necessity of continuous advocacy and vigilance in pursuing equality and justice, ensuring that past abuses do not echo into the future and that society learns from its history to forge a more inclusive and compassionate world.

This evolution of laws underscores a slow societal shift from viewing homosexuality as a capital crime to recognizing the inhumanity of such severe penalties, albeit with considerable variation and resistance across different states. Now mostly considered an arrestable offense, the stigma around homosexuality persisted, and very little, if anything at all, was being done to embrace members of this community. As

history has shown, America has offered greater punishments to its enslaved Black population. Although many colonies had begun to lessen the offense of homosexuality, this privilege was only given to its white citizens. Enslaved Black people (who were already underrepresented and under-protected by the law) could surely face capital punishment if found in the act of engaging in homosexual activity and sodomy.

Moreover, the intersectionality of race and sexuality added layers of complexity to the legal and social challenges faced by Black homosexuals. The overlapping prejudices against race and sexual orientation amplified their vulnerability, often leading to harsher penalties and greater societal rejection. This duality of discrimination reveals a more profound, systemic inequity that pervaded American legal and social structures, highlighting the particular cruelty reserved for those who lived at the margins of the margins.

The trajectory of these legal reforms, while marked by gradual progress towards more humane treatments, also illustrates the deeply ingrained prejudices that persisted into modern times. Even as legal structures began to shift, social acceptance lagged significantly behind. This misalignment between law and societal attitudes fostered environments where prejudice thrived covertly, even in regions where laws had become more lenient.

Efforts to rectify these injustices have been ongoing, with varying degrees of success and failure. Advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights, particularly for those of color, continues to face significant hurdles, reflecting the enduring legacy of historical stigmatization. The journey towards equality and acceptance remains fraught with

challenges, underscoring the need for continued vigilance and advocacy to dismantle the remnants of these archaic views and ensure a more inclusive society.

A long and complex series of efforts have marked America's history of attempting to eradicate homosexuality from its society. These efforts have encompassed everything from legal punishment to attempts at "curing" homosexuality, reflecting deep-seated beliefs about gender and sexuality. Up to this point in the discussion, I have used the term "homosexual" to refer to same-sex relationships. It is essential to clarify that the term itself was first coined in 1869, emerging as a counterpart to "heterosexual" in an era when anything other than male-to-female sexual relationships was seen as aberrant and in need of correction.

The historical attempts to pathologize and penalize homosexuality have been underpinned by a range of pseudo-scientific theories and religious doctrines that framed these relationships as unnatural or morally reprehensible. From the late 19th century onwards, medical and psychological communities at times actively participated in constructing a narrative that required "treatment" for homosexuality, often involving harsh and unethical methods like conversion therapy, institutionalization, and even castration. These interventions were justified under the guise of protecting societal norms and moral values.

Simultaneously, the legal landscape was equally repressive. Numerous laws were enacted to criminalize homosexual acts, often leading to imprisonment, forced labor, and other forms of state-sanctioned punishment. The infamous Stonewall riots of 1969 marked a significant turning point, catalyzing the modern gay rights movement. These

protests underscored the collective frustration and anger against systemic oppression and police brutality, highlighting the urgent need for change and acceptance.

Moreover, the use of the term "homosexual" itself has evolved. Initially used in medical and criminal contexts to label and stigmatize, the term has been reclaimed in some aspects by the LGBTQ+ community over time. However, its clinical connotations and historical baggage have led many within the community to prefer terms like "gay" or "lesbian," which are perceived as more affirming and devoid of the pathological implications historically associated with "homosexual."

As society progresses, the narrative surrounding homosexuality continues to evolve. The transition from viewing LGBTQ+ identities as conditions to be cured to recognizing them as part of the natural spectrum of human diversity reflects broader changes in societal attitudes toward gender and sexuality. This shift, while slow and uneven, represents a move towards greater acceptance and understanding, although significant challenges remain in combating lingering prejudices and ensuring equal rights for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Over the centuries, numerous strategies have been employed to suppress, "correct," or punish homosexual behavior. Initially, as we have seen, severe legal penalties were common, with some jurisdictions even imposing the death penalty for acts of sodomy. As society's understanding of sexuality evolved, so too did the methods of addressing homosexuality, though not always towards more enlightened approaches. Throughout the 20th century, the focus shifted more toward medicalizing homosexual behavior. This period saw the rise of pseudo-scientific practices such as conversion therapy, which attempted to "convert" homosexuals into heterosexuals using methods

that have since been widely discredited and condemned for their cruelty and ineffectiveness. These interventions were often justified based on dubious psychological, physiological, and religious arguments.

Critics of homosexuality have historically grounded their objections in a mixture of moral, political, and purportedly scientific reasons. These arguments often intertwined deeply held religious beliefs with emerging psychological theories to form a potent ideological stance against homosexuality. Such views persisted well into the latter half of the 20th century and, in some circles, continue to influence debates about the rights and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals today.

The transformation in how society deals with homosexuality can also be seen in the gradual shift from criminalization to grudging acceptance and, eventually, to legal recognition of same-sex relationships. This evolution, however, has been neither linear nor uniform across different regions of the United States. As laws and societal norms have changed, the struggle for acceptance and equality for homosexual individuals continues, reflecting broader tensions within American culture regarding diversity and human rights.

In essence, America's approach to homosexuality has been marked by a series of revisions and reconsiderations, moving from outright hostility and attempts to eradicate homosexual behavior to a more complex and, at times, more accepting stance. Yet, this journey reflects broader cultural battles over the nature of sexuality and the rights of individuals to live authentically in the face of longstanding prejudices.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Equity, and Inclusion in the theological context has a profound expression in Acts 8:26-40, where Philip encounters the Ethiopian Eunuch. Equity and inclusion are often used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings. Equity, as defined by the Oxford Review, is “The fair and just treatment of all individuals, with a focus on addressing systemic inequalities and removing barriers to ensure equal outcomes for everyone”[1]. Equity is rooted in equal and fair treatment and opportunity for everyone. Meanwhile, Inclusion is defined as the practice of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to participate fully.”[2]

Reading Acts 8:26-40 through the lens of Equity and Inclusion can offer a different perspective than how this text has been traditionally understood. Often, while conducting a critical reading of biblical texts, we must diligently search for the voice and the experience of the oppressed, which are commonly overlooked and ignored. James H. Cone shares in his book, *God of the Oppressed,* "To interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in

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[1] *The Oxford Review DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) Dictionary*, 2024 ed. (Oxford: The Oxford Review, 2024).

[2] Association of American Colleges & Universities, *Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: A Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2015), 1.

America without seeing it from the perspective of the oppressed is to distort the meaning of the Christian faith and thus to betray the revelation of God in Jesus Christ".[3]

Acts 8:26-40 provides a much deeper connection to inclusion, challenging the boundaries that have historically defined who is worthy of belonging within religious communities. The theological foundation of this text is rooted in equity and inclusion as a spiritual practice, or more broadly, as an unrecognized sacrament. The practical theology displayed in this text is shown as an embrace of radical inclusion, which is essential for congregations willing to engage equity and inclusion as a sacrament shared with all. Jesus instituted the sacraments during His earthly ministry as outward signs of inward grace. In the Presbyterian USA tradition, two sacraments are observed.[4] The first sacrament, which is expressed in Acts 8:26-40, is the sacrament of Baptism, and the second is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Together, these sacraments serve as means of grace and visible signs of God's covenant, offering both identity and nourishment to the believer within the life of the Church.

The first time God interacted with mankind was in Genesis 1:26-27, a passage that sets the tone not only for anthropology but also for how we understand divine intention for human community: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness… So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." This passage does more than narrate the beginning of human life, it establishes the theological foundation of diversity, equity, and inclusion. From the very beginning, God affirms that humanity is not made in a

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[3] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 35.

[4] *Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II*, 2023–2025 ed. (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2023), W-3.0402.

fragmented or utilitarian way, but is instead shaped in the imago Dei, the image and likeness of God.[5] This divine likeness is not limited to any one gender, race, ability, or social status. Instead, it is distributed across all of humanity, making each person a bearer of God's glory.

The plural language, "let us make," has been interpreted by theologians as a reflection of the relational nature of God, a foreshadowing of the Trinity.[6] If God's being is relational and diverse within unity, then humans, created in that image, are made for interdependence, mutuality, and inclusive community.[7] The phrase "male and female he created them" signals not binary limitation but complementarity and multiplicity, a divine affirmation of difference as essential to God's creative work. This theological vision is further reinforced using the plural pronoun "them" in the creation account: "Male and female he created them." The shift from singular ("him") to plural ("them") is not accidental. It reveals that God's image is not housed in any one individual or gendered form but is distributed across the fullness of humanity.

"Them" signals an expansive inclusivity, suggesting that the imago Dei is reflected not only in the binary categories of male and female, but in the broad, diverse spectrum of human identity. As such, this language invites us to recognize that gender nonconformity, fluidity, and variance are not distortions of creation but rather expressions of the Creator's own richness and relationality. In naming "them," Scripture

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[5] Thomas Albert Howard, *Imago Dei: Human Dignity in Ecumenical Perspective* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 2, http://site.ebrary.com/id/10842032.

[6] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 247–49.

[7] Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 18–22.

affirms the sacred dignity of all human persons and presents diversity itself as integral to divine design.

Thus, the imago Dei establishes a theological claim: diversity is not a problem to be managed, but a gift to be honored. In this way, Genesis 1:26–27 is not simply an origin story, but a sacramental moment, where God's love for plurality, equity, and relational harmony is stamped onto the human body and soul. God's first interaction with mankind is shared through what I have argued to be the first sacrament and the cornerstone of what we might call a sacrament of DEI. Diversity (in origin), equity (in divine value), and inclusion (in communal belonging) are not modern social constructs, but deep theological imperatives rooted in creation itself. They call the Church to shape a community that reflects the image of God not in uniformity but in difference, upheld by grace, and bound in love.

The Ethiopian Eunuch was a triple outsider yet Philip still embraced him and provided him with the same treatment he would for others. The Ethiopian Eunuch and Philips encounter has normally only been discussed and observed through evangelism because of the Ethiopian Eunuch foreigner status.[8] However, little is ever observed about his status as a gender variant minority.

In modern terms, a "eunuch" refers to a castrated man, but in ancient times, the term held a broader meaning. In the Bible, eunuchs often symbolize sexual minorities. Literally meaning "keepers of the bed," eunuchs served by protecting the women in royal courts and wealthy households. To ensure that eunuchs would not engage sexually with

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[8] Kittredge Cherry, "Ethiopian Eunuch: First Gentile Christian Was a Queer Black Man," *Q Spirit*, last modified June 2, 2023, https://qspirit.net/ethiopian-eunuch-church-queers/#:~:text=He%20was%20a%20triple%20outsider,reading%20when%20Philip%20met%20him.

the women they guarded, employers often selected castrated men, homosexual men, or intersex individuals. Many eunuchs were both castrated and homosexual, though this was not universally the case.

The encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch disrupts conventional cultural norms and questions exclusionary practices in religious contexts. The Ethiopian Eunuch, who embodies ethnic and physical differences, challenges early church norms of purity and belonging. This interaction invites modern faith communities to reconsider their own practices and biases, especially those that exclude marginalized groups. If ministry leaders participate in a symposium (or conference or workshop) about affirming LGBTQIA+ and QTPOC individuals, then they will be equipped to promote healing and inclusion within the church and the surrounding community. Such inclusion is not merely a progressive social move but a foundational theological principle with deep roots in the scriptural narrative and church tradition.

The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 offers a vivid illustration of marginalization and the breaking of social boundaries, as Philip engages with someone who, by ethnic and social standards, would be seen as an outsider.[9] Scholars like Zorodzai Dube use migration theory to analyze this narrative, interpreting the Ethiopian Eunuch as a figure of identity and social negotiation within a religious context.

Migration theory reveals the Ethiopian Eunuch's journey as a metaphor for the challenges that marginalized individuals face when entering spaces where they are "othered." By approaching and baptizing the Eunuch, Philip enacts a radical act of

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[9] Zorodzai Dube, "The Ethiopian Eunuch in Transit: A Migrant Theoretical Perspective," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 1–7. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4814.

inclusion, defying cultural and religious purity laws that would have excluded the Eunuch from full participation. This story parallels the experiences of contemporary immigrants and marginalized individuals who face boundaries based on ethnic, social, or sexual identity. The Ethiopian Eunuch's story calls faith communities to engage in practices that welcome rather than exclude. Migration theory examines the deeper motivations driving individuals and households to relocate, whether across domestic regions or international borders. It considers a range of factors, economic, social, environmental, and political, that influence why people choose or are compelled to move from one place to another. Migration is not merely a location change; it reflects complex decisions made for survival, opportunity, family, or escape from adversity.

An essential aspect of migration theory is understanding how movement itself transforms both the migrant and the communities they join or leave. Journeying with those considered "outsiders" provides a unique opportunity to witness their resilience and adaptability firsthand. This process fosters empathy and deepens our understanding of the diverse experiences and challenges migrants face. As migrants bring their histories, cultures, and perspectives into new spaces, they not only seek belonging but also enrich and transform the fabric of the societies they touch. The progressive journey of migration, therefore, becomes a shared path of discovery, resilience, and growth, ultimately highlighting the profound strength found in shared human experience.

Migrants, just like other marginalized and minority groups, have often been seen as an area of focus for churches. People who are amid major life experiences or are facing obstacles in their life could be most likely to interact with a church or other faith

community due to their search for community and search to understand/cope with the crisis in their life.

Secondly, Trauma theory suggests that individuals who have experienced trauma often seek out community as a vital part of their healing process. Trauma can create feelings of isolation, fear, and disconnection, leading survivors to long for relationships that offer safety, understanding, and validation. Community provides a shared space where individuals can express their experiences, find empathy, and rebuild trust. In the context of trauma, communities act as collective spaces for resilience and support, enabling people to feel less alone in their struggles. These connections can be formal, such as support groups or therapeutic spaces, or informal, arising through friendships, faith groups, or shared interests. By connecting with others who may have faced similar challenges, trauma survivors often rediscover their strength, reclaim their voice, and gain confidence. Through community, individuals find a renewed sense of belonging and are empowered to create new narratives that honor their resilience, marking a crucial step in the journey toward healing.

Trauma theory and migration theory intersect meaningfully in understanding how communities form and function for migrants who have often experienced trauma. Migrants, driven by various factors—such as conflict, economic hardship, or persecution—frequently carry the weight of trauma from their past environments and the journey itself. Trauma theory illuminates why these individuals seek community in their new locations: it is not just a search for a place to live but for a sense of belonging, safety, and understanding that can help them process their experiences and rebuild their lives.

Migration theory emphasizes the push-pull factors influencing relocation, yet it also acknowledges the critical role of social networks in migrant adaptation and resilience. As migrants transition to new environments, they frequently connect with others who share similar backgrounds or experiences. This community not only supports the practical aspects of migration, such as navigating language barriers or finding employment, but also offers a crucial space for emotional, psychological, and spiritual healing, where shared experiences of migration and trauma create bonds of trust and solidarity. Thus, trauma theory enriches migration theory by explaining the deeper need for community among migrants, where healing and adaptation go hand in hand. Community networks serve as a cornerstone for mental well-being, allowing migrants to transform shared pain into collective strength. In this way, migration becomes a journey not only of relocation but of recovery, resilience, mutual empowerment, and spiritual enrichment while underscoring the profound interdependence between place, belonging, and healing.

The migration of Black Americans from the South to the North, often referred to as the Great Migration, was one of the most significant internal movements in U.S. history.[10] Beginning in the early 20th century and spanning several decades, millions of African Americans left the rural South in search of freedom, opportunity, and a better quality of life for themselves and their families. This migration was fueled by a combination of oppressive social conditions in the South as well as oppressive religious dogma that was an attempt to keep them in a subservient position. Migrating to the North

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[10] Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1918).

was a chance to achieve better economic, social, and spiritual treatment that could not be gained in Southern cities.

In the South, Black Americans faced the pervasive violence of Jim Crow laws, racial discrimination, and limited economic opportunities, particularly in the sharecropping and agricultural systems that kept many in conditions akin to slavery. The threat of lynching and racial terror loomed large, while black churches in the south were often boomed or targets of racial violence, creating an environment of fear and oppression. Seeking to escape these brutal conditions, many families looked to the North as a place where they could live with greater dignity, access education, and build a future unencumbered by the systematic discrimination of the South. White southern Christians used the bible to and their exclusive religious communities to intentionally separate themselves from black Christians while also claiming that their whiteness was preferred by God. Many White Christians used Ephesians 6, “Slaves, obey your master” as a justification for their hatred and supremacy over Black Americans.

Although life in the North came with its own set of challenges, including racial discrimination, housing segregation, and economic inequality, the North still provided more opportunities for political and social participation. Black Americans could organize, form communities, and advocate for civil rights in ways that would have been perilous in the South. This migration profoundly reshaped American society. It led to the growth of vibrant Black urban communities, such as Harlem in New York and Bronzeville in Chicago, which became centers of culture, art, and activism. The Harlem Renaissance, for example, was a cultural movement that emerged after this migration, producing some of the most influential Black artists, writers, and thinkers of the 20th century. The Great

Migration also laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement. Migrants brought with them a deep-seated desire for freedom and equality, as well as the experiences that would fuel resistance against racial injustice. Organizations like the NAACP and later movements advocating for civil rights drew momentum from the sense of agency and possibility that migrants had developed in their northern communities.

In many ways, the Great Migration was a journey of survival, resilience, and transformation. Migrants sought not only jobs and stability but also a space where they could exercise their rights, find self-determination, and achieve a better quality of life for future generations. Their journey exemplifies the enduring pursuit of freedom and justice, underscoring the resilience of Black Americans in the face of adversity and their vital contributions to the fabric of American society.

The migration of Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC) of faith shares striking similarities with the migration of Black Americans from the South to the North. Although QTPOC are not migrating to a specific geographic location, they are indeed searching for communities of faith that are safe havens for them to grow spiritually. Both migrations are driven by a search for safety, freedom, opportunity, and a better quality of life, as well as a deep desire to live authentically in environments that foster dignity and empowerment. These migrations also represent profound cultural shifts and resilience as marginalized communities seek to carve out spaces where they can thrive. Individuals seeking this level of inclusion have begun opening their own churches and reformation.[11]

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[11] Tat Bellamy-Walker, "This Pastor Is Working to Create a Vision of a Queer-Friendly Black Church," *Today*, last modified February 7, 2023, https://www.today.com/news/celebrate-black-history-1/vision-queer-friendly-black-church-rcna67517.

These migratory journeys mirror a broader narrative of transformation, adaptation, and resilience. By leaving spaces of oppression, both Black Americans in the Great Migration and QTPOC in contemporary times illuminate the power of movement as a form of liberation. This form of religious migration for the sake of liberating once self to follow God is a term I would like to introduce as "Kinetheos". Kinetheos (from the Greek words kineo, meaning "to move," and theos, meaning "God") is the doctrine or concept that movement—whether physical, spiritual, or communal—is divinely inspired as a means of personal and collective liberation. It suggests that God's presence is experienced and liberation is achieved through movement, aligning one's actions, thoughts, and community with divine purpose. Throughout biblical history, we have seen groups kinetheos by removing themselves from environments detrimental to themselves and their people.

The children of Israel kinetheosed after Moses heard from God, embodying the divine directive to move as an act of liberation. Each step they took away from Egypt was a physical manifestation of faith, a dynamic response to God's call to break free from bondage. This movement wasn't simply an escape but a sacred journey, where every stride brought them closer to a life aligned with divine promise and dignity. Their kinetheosing involved resilience and trust, even when faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles like the Red Sea. In these moments, movement itself became a form of worship and a declaration of belief in God's power to guide them through adversity. The sea parting in response to their steps was a divine affirmation of this journey, a reminder that movement in obedience to God's voice brings pathways even where none seemed possible.

Jacob kinetheosed when he fled from Esau and later returned years after, having wrestled with God and been transformed. His movement was not just physical but symbolic of a deep inner change. After his encounter with the divine at Peniel, Jacob walked with a limp, a physical marker of both his struggle and his blessing, embodying liberation from his past identity and the journey toward becoming Israel. Elijah kinetheosed when God commanded him to go into the wilderness, where ravens fed him, and later to the widow of Zarephath's home, where he performed miracles. His movements under God's guidance demonstrated God's provision and sovereignty, even in isolation or unlikely places.

Jonah kinetheosed when he initially fled from God's command to go to Nineveh, later journeying reluctantly after being redirected by God. Jonah's movements symbolized the struggle between divine call and personal reluctance, showing that God can bring liberation not only to the prophet but also to entire nations. Mary and Joseph kinetheosed to Bethlehem where Jesus was to be born, fulfilling the prophecy of the Messiah's birthplace. Later, they kinetheosed to Egypt to escape King Herod's persecution. These movements were acts of protection, obedience, and fulfillment of prophecy, illustrating the role of movement in God's unfolding plan of salvation.

Radical movement for the sake of spiritual awakening and following after the voice of God has always been rewarded. Kinetheos is faith in action. Trusting that God voice, protection, and guidance will lead us to where he ultimately is moving his people into. We see kinetheos show up in our focus text with Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The Ethiopian eunuch, trusting in the God that was sending him, kinetheosed through his encounter with Philip on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, a movement that became a

transformative moment of divine revelation and liberation. As a high-ranking official in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia, he had journeyed to Jerusalem to worship. Yet, he returned without a complete understanding of the faith he sought. His physical journey reflects a spiritual longing—a movement toward understanding and connection with God.

On the road, the Holy Spirit directed Philip to approach the eunuch's chariot. The eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah, struggling to comprehend its meaning. Philip, joining him, explained how the prophecy pointed to Jesus. The eunuch's movement, then, became a journey of discovery and faith, as he eagerly embraced the teachings and recognized Jesus as the Messiah.

The act of kinetheosing continued as they came upon a body of water. Nowhere in the text prior to this point had baptism been raised between the two. Philip must have discussed baptism with the eunuch before the eunuch's baptism request.[12] The eunuch, moved by newfound belief, asked to be baptized, saying, "What prevents me from being baptized?" This question signifies a personal liberation; he realizes nothing stands between him and full inclusion in the family of God. His baptism marked a profound moment of freedom, where his journey, both physical and spiritual, culminated in the acceptance of divine grace.

Through this act of kinetheos, the Ethiopian eunuch's identity was transformed; he was no longer merely a seeker but a fully initiated believer, ready to return home as a witness for Christ. His journey exemplifies that movement in faith, both the seeking and the literal travel, can lead to profound personal liberation and spiritual fulfillment. In

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[12] Das, A. Andrew. "Acts 8: Water, Baptism, and the Spirit." *Concordia Journal* 19, no. 2 (April 1993): 120.

looking at this narrative from the perspective of the Ethiopian eunuch, this journey could have ended immediately if Philip embraced a form of theology rooted in hierarchy and supremacy.

Unfortunately, for many Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC), the exclusion and rejection of their individual expressions of freedom have disrupted their spiritual and personal journeys. The encounters they have with those who could offer guidance and acceptance—the "Philips" in their lives—are often fraught with judgment and conditional acceptance. These individuals, in search of safety, have been told, "God loves the sinner but hates the sin." They have realized that many Black Churches will not accept them so as long as they are actively in a "homosexual lifestyle". Such conditional language has reshaped the relationship many QTPOC have with the Black Church. How can one hate the essence of who someone is but, in the same breath, say that they love them? Love cannot coexist where there is hate. Instead of embodying the role of compassionate guides who meet them where they are, these modern-day Philips prioritize adherence to the traditions and norms of their churches or communities over true inclusion and understanding.

These experiences reflect a troubling reality: many QTPOC seek spaces where their identities are not only tolerated but embraced as integral aspects of their personhood. The church's position on homosexuality has turned a massive amount of people away from the church rather than turning them to the church. When faced with gatekeepers who are more concerned with conforming to established religious doctrines or social expectations than with welcoming them with open hearts, QTPOC are often left feeling alienated and spiritually homeless. They, in many aspects, are the new migrants

that the church has pushed away and gave them a contingency to be reaccepted into their community. While it is true, that many QTPOC have adhered to the church's contingency that prohibits them from marrying the same sex or presenting themselves in a way that seems to be tied to a "homosexual lifestyle", many have agreed to these often unspoken terms to maintain their footing in the black church. This exclusion stifles their ability to fully engage in the community's life and prevents them from experiencing the healing and growth that come from being part of a nurturing faith space like heterosexual churchgoers freely enjoy.

The consequences of this conditional acceptance are significant. The act of kinetheos, whether physically moving to new places or spiritually seeking a faith community that aligns with one's beliefs and identity—can be transformative. However, it is essential to recognize that God's calling for queer people of faith is not a uniform one. Just like God's calling for every Black America was not the same during the great migration. Some Black Americans decided to stay in the South; some fled to the Midwest and more western places, while others traveled to the North. Also from conversations that I have had with many queer people of faith, they are happily content with their non-affirming church and have found ways to embed themselves in their church without drawing much attention to their sexuality. They have found ways to navigate their spiritual lives within these spaces, embedding themselves as valued members without drawing significant attention to their sexuality. A profound love for Black church tradition's nostalgia and cultural richness often drives this choice. The sounds of the B3 organ, the powerful and dynamic music, and the sense of shared community among the "saints" create a worship experience that is spiritually fulfilling and culturally significant.

For many, these elements evoke an irreplaceable sense of home and belonging. Finding an alternative church ministry, the is reminiscent of the tradition that they come from is difficult. In fact, in some cities or communities, it is impossible. Having the privilege to worship in the style of your choice in an open and affirming ministry is not a easily to come by for many people.

This reality speaks to the broader issue of how faith communities understand and practice inclusion. The scarcity of affirming spaces that uphold the depth and vibrancy of traditional Black church experiences underscores a gap in how churches approach diversity and embrace change. For those who remain in non-affirming ministries, it often involves a delicate balancing act between finding nourishment for the soul and protecting one's emotional and spiritual well-being. These individuals demonstrate a quiet resilience, choosing to stay connected to their roots while navigating the complexities of conditional acceptance. Moreover, their presence in these spaces is not without significance. By remaining part of these communities, queer people of faith often serve as quiet testaments to the diversity of God's creation, challenging stereotypes and broadening the understanding of what it means to be a person of faith. They show that faith is not defined solely by outward expressions or conformity to traditional norms but by a deeply personal relationship with the divine that can coexist with and embrace all aspects of identity.

If many QTPOC are choosing to remain in non-affirming spaces, not as an act of passive acceptance but as a silent act of resistance—an assertion that they are here, worthy, and should be seen and recognized—then church leaders must rise to the

challenge.[13] They must embody the spirit of Philip and dare to step beyond the boundaries of tradition to ensure that everyone is welcomed and included. They must decide to kinetheos through their faith and arrive at a place where God does not hate what He has created but God loves everything that he has made.[14] The presence of QTPOC in these spaces is a testament to resilience and a profound statement that their faith, culture, and identities are inseparable and deserve to be honored within the broader faith community. The call, then, is for faith communities to do more than offer conditional acceptance. It is an invitation to deeply reflect on how they can create environments where every person, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, can be fully seen, heard, and cherished. This involves reimagining worship experiences that resonate culturally and spiritually, ensuring that the powerful elements of Black church tradition—such as the music, the B3 organ, the communal fellowship—are not compromised, but expanded to include all who seek to worship. It is about crafting a sanctuary where the joy of worship is intertwined with true inclusivity, and where transformation through *kinetheos* is not hindered by exclusion or conditional belonging.

To bridge this gap, church leaders must commit to a vision that transcends mere tolerance and reflects a deep, active embrace of diversity. It requires breaking away from practices that prioritize conformity over compassion and choosing to stand with the marginalized, much like Philip did when he defied cultural norms to welcome the Ethiopian eunuch. This commitment calls for leaders to listen, learn, and be willing to

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[13] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 114.

[14] Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 66.

reshape traditions that limit the full participation of QTPOC. Cultivating such spaces means celebrating the gifts that QTPOC bring—their stories, their resilience, their expressions of faith—and ensuring that these contributions are not overlooked or marginalized. It is an acknowledgment that their presence enriches the church and that their faith journey is vital to the collective story. Church leaders must be willing to make bold choices that reflect God's radical and inclusive love, showing that the church is not just a place for some but a home for all.

Only through such efforts can the true spirit of worship—a space where everyone can sing, pray, and connect without fear or hesitation—be realized. When church leaders act like Philip, willing to step beyond comfort zones and embrace those who have been marginalized, they embody the heart of Christ's message. They demonstrate that the transformation sought through *kinetheos* is a shared journey, marked not by exclusion but by a profound and collective growth. This is how faith communities can move forward, creating spaces where the beauty of worship, the power of tradition, and the embrace of one's full identity come together in a celebration of unity and love.

The church transcends its identity as a mere human organization; it stands as an embodiment of the Living Word and the tangible presence of the divine. It is called not only to be a community of believers but a reflection of God's inclusive and transformative nature. This sacred mandate challenges the church to act as a living testimony to the boundless grace and acceptance that scripture embodies. Through the Holy Spirit's guidance, the church must become a vessel that reaches beyond comfort zones and societal norms to welcome and affirm those marginalized by society and history. The church's mission to uphold divine inclusivity calls for continuous self-

examination. It must ask itself hard questions: Are its doors and doctrines open to everyone, or do they subtly or overtly reinforce exclusion? Scripture, as the authoritative source of divine truth, provides the theological foundation for inclusive practices. It claims that God's message of love and salvation knows no bounds. The interaction between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch testifies that no person is beyond God's reach or love. Despite societal norms that would have excluded the Eunuch due to his status as a non-Jew and a eunuch, the Spirit directed Philip to join him on his journey, share the gospel, and baptize him as a fellow believer. This act underscores that inclusion is not an addendum to the Christian faith—it is central to its identity.

Biblical and practical theology, when interwoven, create a comprehensive and powerful framework for grasping the profound theme of inclusion within the Christian faith. Each theological discipline contributes uniquely to this understanding, enriching the church's grasp of its divine mandate to foster a community that reflects God's boundless love and justice.

Biblical theology grounds itself in the specific stories and historical narratives of scripture, uncovering God's character and intentions as demonstrated through the lives and experiences of His people. Stories such as the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 illustrate this inclusive nature vividly. Here, we see God's deliberate action in reaching beyond traditional boundaries of ethnicity, status, and societal norms to extend grace and belonging. This narrative, like many others within the biblical corpus, paints a clear picture of a God whose arms are open to all, inviting those marginalized and excluded by human constructs into the fold of divine relationship.

From the earliest texts of the Old Testament, God's inclusive nature is evident. In Genesis, God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) set the stage for a people chosen not for exclusive privilege but to be a blessing to "all the families of the earth." This covenant reflects the expansive nature of God's promises and establishes a pattern that recurs throughout scripture: the intention that His message and blessings are not confined to one group but are ultimately for all of humanity. This divine intention comes into sharper focus through the prophets, who often rebuked Israel for neglecting justice and failing to embrace outsiders and the marginalized. For example, in Isaiah 56:3-8, God explicitly proclaims His acceptance of foreigners and eunuchs, stating, "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered." This radical inclusivity signals God's vision for a community that transcends national and social boundaries.

Practical theology, alongside biblical theology, provides a compelling and holistic framework for understanding and applying the theme of inclusion within the church's life. While biblical theology reveals God's inclusive nature through the narratives of scripture, practical theology takes these scriptural insights and integrates them into the everyday practices and lived experiences of faith communities. This dual approach ensures that the principles of equity and inclusion move beyond theoretical doctrine into actionable, life-changing practices that shape the church's engagement with the world. At its core, practical theology emphasizes that faith must be practiced—it must be visible and impactful in daily interactions, community engagement, and institutional structures (Flunder 2005). It challenges the church to move beyond theoretical affirmations of inclusion to the actual integration of inclusive practices in worship, leadership, outreach, and discipleship. This involves examining how beliefs about God's inclusive nature

inform how congregations welcome newcomers, engage with marginalized communities, and respond to issues of social justice.

Practical theology informs how churches educate and form their members. It involves creating educational programs that teach the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion from a theological perspective. This can include Bible studies and sermons that explore stories of inclusion, like the Ethiopian Eunuch or the ministry of Jesus with marginalized people, and discussions that connect these stories to contemporary issues. Training church leaders to recognize their own biases and understand the lived experiences of marginalized individuals is also a key aspect of practical theology. These educational efforts equip church leaders and members with the tools they need to create a more inclusive and empathetic community. The outreach practices of a church are a direct expression of its theology. Practical theology pushes churches to look outward and engage with their communities in ways that reflect God's inclusive love. This means developing partnerships with organizations that support marginalized groups, advocating for policies that promote social justice, and ensuring that the church's mission work is inclusive and equitable.[15] For instance, churches can create support groups for LGBTQIA+ members, immigrants, or other communities who often find themselves marginalized in traditional faith settings. This practical step underscores that inclusion is not just about making space within the church walls but extending it to the broader community.

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[15] Thinadavha Derrick Mashau, "Rethinking the Use of Disruptive Pop-Up Encounters for Transformation: A Missional Reading of Acts 8:26–40," *Missiology: An International Review* 50, no. 2 (2022): 189.

The theme of inclusion and equity is deeply embedded in the history of Christian thought, finding its place in both classical and modern theological discourses. From the early church fathers to contemporary theologians, these principles have been engaged with and interpreted to address the needs and challenges of their times. This exploration underscores that inclusion and equity are not peripheral concerns but central to understanding and living out the Christian faith. Thomas Aquinas contributed to the theme of equity through his exploration of justice in *Summa Theologica*.[16] Aquinas viewed justice as integral to the Christian moral life, defining it as giving each person their due, which inherently included a sense of fairness and equity. His concept of equity—adapting the application of general laws to specific cases—anticipated the church's responsibility to ensure that rigid structures did not lead to exclusion or injustice. Although Aquinas did not explicitly address modern inclusion, his principles laid a theological groundwork for fair and compassionate practices within the church.

While it is that modern examples such as James Cone addressed the racial inequities deeply embedded in society and the church. Cone argued that true inclusivity requires recognizing and dismantling systems of oppression that exclude marginalized communities. His work was a powerful reminder that equity must be part of the church's practice, pushing it to live out the radical inclusivity seen in the life and teachings of Jesus. Cone's linking the crucifixion of Christ to the brutal reality of lynching—serves as a poignant reminder that the church cannot stand by when injustice prevails. Just as Christ's crucifixion was a profound act of solidarity with the oppressed, so too must the

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[16] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), I-II, q. 94, a. 2.

church stand with QTPOC, recognizing their suffering as part of the broader call to dismantle injustice and advocate for true equity. The pain and agony that Christ endured on the cross resonate deeply with the struggles faced by those who are excluded and oppressed today, reminding the church that it is called to be an instrument of healing and justice.

It is my hope that this call to action will inspire faith leaders, congregants, and theologians to not only become aware of the systemic inequities faced by QTPOC but to become advocates for their inclusion and well-being. The legacy of thinkers like Aquinas and Cone invites the church to reflect on its mission, recommit to the principles of justice and equity, and engage in transformative work that honors the inherent worth of all individuals as beloved children of God.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

The interplay of Equity and Queer theory showcases fascinating perspectives vital to the work of transforming and truly reimagining what life could be for religious spaces. These disciplines are distinct in their aims and offer a transformative understanding of how forms of exclusion and discrimination can be identified to truly engage in reshaping spaces rich in diversity and celebrate the individuality of those represented in the space. In establishing the basic understanding of Queer Theory, the foundation that I would be using is about challenging the idea that people fit neatly into fixed categories like male/female, gay/straight, or masculine/feminine. In a much broader understanding, queer theory focuses on mismatches between sex, gender, and desire. It refuses the stability of identity categories, challenging the notions of fixed binaries and promoting a more fluid understanding of identity and sexuality.[1] Moreover, while queer theory seeks to challenge norms, equity aims to promote fairness that addresses systemic disparities. Together, these perspectives create a robust foundation for exploring issues of marginalization and the paths toward creating inclusive communities.

Equity gains its roots in many social justice movements advocating for education and policy reformers. Individuals who have engaged critically in these disciplines have

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[1] Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 99.

utilized equity to focus on exploring how structural inequalities have resulted in marginalization. Those who engage in the work of equity have an understanding that the groups they are defending are not given a fair chance to begin with. These groups are normally fighting against structural discrimination that has disenfranchised their communities, schools, governments, and overall access to achieve their goals in life. Understanding that the playing field has already given an advantage to certain categories of people, those who are engaged in equity are determined to understand and give people what they need to enjoy full, healthy lives.[2]

It is critical that, in our efforts to define equity, we do not confuse it with equality. While the two concepts are often used interchangeably, they represent fundamentally different approaches to addressing fairness and justice. Equality focuses on providing everyone with the same resources or opportunities, assuming that this uniformity will result in fair outcomes. Undoubtedly, if everyone was born with the same opportunities and access to those opportunities without any unique challenges preventing them from achieving equality would be the most ideal solution to aim for. Since the reality of a truly equal society is distant, we must still advocate for the advancement of equality while understanding that individuals who are born inherently advantageous or disadvantageous based on their social placement in life.

Prominent sociologist Max Weber is considered to have been the founder of the academic discipline of sociology. Max Weber makes a compelling argument around social placement (known to him as social stratification) emphasizing its connection

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[2] Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Advancing Racial Equity: A Guide to the Language," *The Annie E. Casey Foundation*, last modified October 14, 2020, https://www.aecf.org/blog/racial-justice-definitions.

between class, status, and party. Max Weber argued that power is exhibited in the social order through status, in the economic order through class, and the political order through party affiliations. Weber's analysis highlights that societal hierarchies are not solely based on economic factors but also on social prestige and political influence.[3] Each person is born into a social stratification and inherits all the benefits or disadvantages that come with the assignment. Although we are born into a social stratification system shaped by wealth, power, race, education, and occupation, advocates of equity argue that the circumstances of your birth should not limit your ability to achieve social mobility or create the life you aspire to through your efforts. Without the opportunity for equitable outcomes, people will likely feel a sense that they are like "refugees in their own country".[4]

In contrast to equality, equity emphasizes meeting people where they are by understanding and addressing their unique needs and challenges. It aims to distribute resources and opportunities in a way that accounts for historical disadvantages, systemic inequities, and varying levels of privilege. By focusing on fairness rather than sameness, equity strives to create outcomes where everyone has an equal chance to succeed, rather than simply offering identical solutions to fundamentally different problems. Recognizing this distinction is essential if we are to foster true justice and inclusivity in our practices and in our churches.

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[3] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, trans. Ephraim Fischoff et al. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 53.

[4] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 195.

As it relates to the black church, specifically Witherspoon Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis (WPC), engaging in equity and understanding how queer theory impacts the life of members is crucial to creating a truly inclusive and equitable space. Incorporating this understanding into our religious life helps us to not simplify people into limited categories, rather challenge ourselves, our policies, and our theology/doctrine to represent them. Practicing our faith equitably invites God's voice to engage our church in a much more collaborative way.

My decision to engage with equity and queer theory stems from a desire to illuminate the church's historic role as a beacon of equity and inclusion. In particular, the Black church has stood as an oasis of hope and sanctuary for its community, offering a space where individuals could freely express their talents and gifts without fear of judgment. At its height, the church exemplified fairness, granting everyone the opportunity to celebrate their unique identities and contributions. Individuals who came to the church—those living in poverty, working low-income blue-collar jobs, facing racial discrimination in society, or lacking formal education—were given an opportunity to hold influence, power, and status within its walls. In the church where I was raised, there was a common saying: "God can use anyone." Yet, I often wondered if the church truly believed this in practice. Sadly, I fear they did not. The church gave status to those who had little to no status outside of its doors, while cutting others from having the opportunity to experience upward mobility and to achieve their goals. Women and those who had varying sexual orientations have traditionally been isolated from church.

I believe that the contributions made in these disciplines will help strengthen the fundamental claim that I am making that black churches, specifically Witherspoon

Presbyterian Church, have a unique responsibility to commit to creating actionable change within its congregation to support Queer and Trans people of Color. In an interview with Dr. Cornell West with Joe Rogan, he said, “Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and all religions have no wholesale monopoly on how we understand the world because they have all emerged in historical moments”.[5] For the church to remain effective in its modern context, it must actively engage in diverse conversations, exploring new books, perspectives, and voices. This includes delving into a variety of books, embracing different perspectives, and amplifying voices that may not traditionally be heard within its walls. By doing so, the church can cultivate a deeper understanding of the complexities of the world around it and respond to the evolving needs of its community.

Engaging with fresh ideas and viewpoints not only enriches the church's teachings and practices but also reinforces its commitment to inclusivity, growth, and adaptability in an ever-changing society. Only by stepping outside of its comfort zone and seeking wisdom from diverse sources can the church continue to serve as a relevant and transformative force in the lives of its members and the broader world. The church's reliance on the Bible as the sole source for answering all questions and defining all natural laws and phenomena often disregards the inspired wisdom God has imparted through others. This broader wisdom offers valuable insights into how we can maintain fellowship and build a meaningful community with one another. Embracing these diverse perspectives does not diminish the Bible's significance but rather enhances our

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[5] Cornel West, interview by Joe Rogan, *The Joe Rogan Experience*, no. 1325, August 29, 2019, podcast, 2:48:17, https://open.spotify.com/episode/3Yx4o4cJzGgSr8bHzxIr0n.

understanding of God's work in the world and His call for us to live in harmony and unity.

The Black church, a historically significant institution in promoting social justice and community empowerment, faces challenges in fully embracing individuals of different sexual orientations due to deeply rooted theological interpretations, cultural stigmas, and a lack of open dialogue on issues of sexuality. This tension often results in feelings of exclusion, alienation, and spiritual harm among LGBTQ+ (specifically QTPOC+ individuals) within the community, hindering the church's mission to embody inclusivity, love, and justice. Without addressing these barriers, the Black church risks marginalizing a vital segment of its congregation, diminishing its role as a sanctuary for all and limiting its capacity for holistic community engagement and transformation. The challenge the church has had with addressing sexuality is a real challenge impacting real lives. Sadly, the the church has been attempting to provide a response by engaging in biblical debates and utilizing their bible as the source of truth.

The church's failure to fully acknowledge and affirm the lived experiences of its parishioners and the broader community has fostered a climate of hostility between the QTPOC+ community and the church. Historically revered as a champion of social justice, the church is now often perceived as an anti-LGBTQ+ institution. This prevailing stance has shifted the church's reputation from being a sanctuary of inclusion and advocacy to a space where exclusion and divisiveness are dominant narratives. Selective politics of respectability have overtaken the church. A voice like the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has not been widely adhered to. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" comes from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham

Jail," written on April 16, 1963.[6] This letter is one of his most famous works, where he passionately argues for civil disobedience against unjust laws and emphasizes the interconnectedness of communities and struggles for justice. When King was writing this, he was speaking to the racial injustice that was being upheld by the systems in the United States and the deep-rooted racism that was being covered up in southern states.

However, if we were to apply the wisdom of King's writings and shine the light of his words through the stained-glass windows of America's Christian religious institutions, the injustices and discrimination faced by queer people and women would be vividly illuminated. The reflections would reveal not only the beauty of the church's potential but also the urgent need for radical transformation to address these deep-seated inequities. One of the greatest obstacles preventing the church from accepting and inviting individuals of different sexual orientations is the pervasive belief among many within it that they are not part of the problem. They lay claim that these persons were born in sin and must be born again (taking this from John 3:3-7).

Ultimately, sin has become the great divider of the two. Sin is what the church believes has separated the heterosexual from the homosexual, casting one as aligned with divine order and the other as deviating from it. A church that is sin-conscious is a church that often focuses more on judgment and moral policing than on grace, restoration, and love. While an awareness of sin can serve as a call to accountability, an overemphasis on sin risks creating a culture of fear, shame, and exclusion, rather than one of healing and transformation. Such a church may struggle to fully embody the gospel's message of

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[6] Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963, in *Why We Can't Wait* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1964), 77–100.

reconciliation, as it becomes more preoccupied with identifying wrongdoing than fostering relationships and reflecting the unconditional love of Christ. Therefore, the problem can not be sin. The problem must be the church's inability to challenge itself to reflect the love of God, which sometimes causes the one offering that love to be uncomfortable or to be inspired to adapt.

Applying equity to this issue and incorporating insights from queer theory challenges the church to recognize its responsibility to create a sanctuary that is genuinely inclusive for all people, regardless of personal biases or opinions. This approach calls the church to acknowledge that further marginalizing those who are already oppressed undermines its mission to share the love and grace of God extended to everyone. QTPOC individuals who visit the church are already navigating unique challenges tied to their Blackness, compounded by the discrimination they face due to their queerness. The church must rise above these societal injustices to be a place of healing and refuge, embodying the inclusive love it professes to represent.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 provides a powerful scriptural foundation for applying principles of equity and insights from queer theory within the context of faith. The Ethiopian eunuch, as a Black person and a eunuch, embodies intersectional identities that likely placed him at the margins of society and religious practice. His identity is fascinating as it is closely knitted to the identities of QTPOC in our modern society. The Ethiopian eunuch is "othered" due to his complexion and was subjected to castration as a result of his identity. These identities marked him as racially distinct in a predominantly Jewish context and further marginalized through his status as a eunuch, a condition imposed upon him likely due to societal expectations tied

to his role. His dual identity—both as a Black individual and as someone who does not conform to traditional gender and sexual norms—places him at the intersection of racial and physical othering. These layers of exclusion not only reflect the systemic oppression of his time but also underscore the radical inclusivity of the gospel message, as his encounter with Philip ultimately affirms his full dignity and worth in the eyes of God.

In this narrative, we see the gospel breaking through cultural and societal barriers, affirming the dignity and worth of a person who might have been excluded under traditional norms. Philip never highlights or calls out the eunuch's differences. He does not reduce him to a "secondary class Christian" or demand that he undergo a transformative experience to change his identity. Instead, Philip walks alongside the Ethiopian eunuch, acknowledging and respecting his humanity while remaining sensitive to any past experiences or traumas that may have shaped him. The eunuch, on his part, was actively searching and embarking on a journey of discovery in God. His journey was undoubtedly difficult, as he was found traveling alone. One might draw a parallel between his physical journey and his spiritual journey—both marked by isolation. He was alone in every sense: physically, socially, and spiritually. This solitude underscores the significance of Philip's willingness to meet him where he was and to affirm his place in the unfolding story of God's love.

As explained earlier, equity is when everyone is given the specific resources, support, or opportunities they need to succeed, recognizing that different people start from different places due to systemic barriers or individual circumstances. Unlike equality, which assumes everyone benefits from the same level of support, equity seeks to address disparities by tailoring assistance to ensure fair outcomes. In the context of

Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, equity is demonstrated when Philip meets the eunuch exactly where he is—both physically and spiritually—ensuring that he has the understanding and resources needed to fulfill his desire to be embraced as a Christian. Philip does not impose barriers or conditions but instead provides the guidance and support necessary for the eunuch's inclusion in the faith community. Many Christians today have made arguments that it is impossible to be "Gay and a Christian"[7] often citing interpretations of scripture to support the belief that certain identities or behaviors are incompatible with salvation. Their claim is rooted in the premise that one cannot simultaneously be sinful, as they define sin, and saved, creating a dichotomy that excludes individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Such arguments fail to acknowledge the transformative nature of grace and the inclusive message of the gospel, which calls all people to God without precondition. In the story of Philip and the eunuch, Philip does not question the eunuch's worthiness or identity. He does not impose additional requirements for his salvation, nor does he treat him as an outsider to be corrected or reformed. Instead, Philip recognizes the eunuch's desire to seek God, engages him with compassion and understanding, and baptizes him without hesitation, affirming his full inclusion in the community of believers.

This narrative challenges the exclusionary theology that labels certain identities as inherently incompatible with faith. It underscores the importance of focusing on the shared humanity and spiritual journey of all individuals, rather than creating barriers based on personal or doctrinal interpretations. Just as Philip exemplified equity by

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[7] Marcus Rogers, Will Horn, and Romell Parks-Weekly, *Marcus Rogers vs 2 Gay Pastors DEBATE: Can You Be GAY and CHRISTIAN*, YouTube video, 1:56:12, posted by Marcus Rogers, October 25, 2024.

meeting the eunuch where he was and affirming his place in God's kingdom, the church today is called to embody the same grace and inclusivity, extending love and acceptance to all who seek to know God, regardless of their identity. This approach not only aligns with the gospel's core message but also reflects a deeper understanding of what it means to live as a community of faith. A theology of inclusion is indeed a biblical form of fellowship and expression of love for our neighbor.

Historically, the church has often been a oasis of hope and a force in standing with the oppressed who were amongst us while aslo serving as an advocate for racial justice. Although their fight was not easy the church did not only utlize the bible and the teachings of Jesus Christ, who consistently aligned himself with marginalized and disenfranchised individuals, to solve all the answers to their struggles. However, the church made moral appeals and aligned those moral appeals with their Christian values which played a pivotal role in movements for justice and equity. Regardless of how far we have come, equity was campaigned through a shared belief in hope. Hope that could not be erased by the bigotry and hatred that fueled white supremacy of its day. But a hope that united and liberated others through the moral teachings of a God that was capable of paving their stoney roads.

The spirit of this day is truly captured in the Negro National Anthem also commonly known as "Life Every Voice and Sing" penned by James Weldon Johnson and composed by his brother J. Rosamond Johnson in 1900.[8] In verse two, James Johnson writes,

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[8] James Weldon Johnson, *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (Brooklyn, NY: Edward B. Marks Music Company, 1900).

Stony the road we trod,

Bitter the chastening rod,

Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;

Yet with a steady beat,

Have not our weary feet

Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,

We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,

Out from the gloomy past,

Till now we stand at last

Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

In this, we can hear the duality of struggle and freedom, offering a calming reassurance that the hope long deferred will one day be realized. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. captured this sentiment in his iconic *I Have a Dream* speech, proclaiming, "America will one day have to cash its check." In other words, there exists a promise—a commitment made to every American—that must eventually be honored. This promise embodies the ideals of justice, equality, and opportunity, and the realization of these values remains a profound aspiration for the nation, not just the white people that had benefited from the current systems of his day.

Similary to King's understanding about the check that America must one day cash, I too believe that there is a check that the black church must cash. That check is written for Black queer and trans people and co-signed by Black cis-gender women who also share in the suffering of and discrimination perpetuated by the actors of the church.

The promise that QTPOC stand on is found in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God, in all of God’s omniscience and boundless compassion, gave. He gave not only as an act of generosity but as a profound demonstration of unconditional love—a love that sees and affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all people, including those who have often been marginalized or excluded by society and even by faith communities. He gave for the European equally as he gave to the African. He gave for the Heterosexual justly as he gave for the homosexual. In this act of giving, God showed that no one is beyond the reach of His grace, and no identity can diminish the depth of His love.

This promise is a foundation of hope for QTPOC individuals, reminding them that they are not an afterthought in God’s divine plan. The check that God held for them was already cashed though the institution that adorns His name refuses to acknowledge it. QTPOC are fully seen, fully loved, and fully embraced as part of the "world" God so deeply loves. The verse also challenges any narrative that seeks to limit or set conditions on God's love, affirming that faith in Him transcends boundaries of race, gender, and sexual identity. This type of advocacy is deeply embedded in the biblical tradition, which emphasizes themes of liberation, compassion, and the pursuit of justice for all people.

For example, during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Black churches served as the backbone of the struggle for racial equality. Leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. drew upon their faith to inspire activism against systemic racism, segregation, and economic inequality. The church provided not only spiritual sustenance but also a physical space for organizing, strategizing, and mobilizing communities to

demand justice. Sermons, prayers, and gospel music became rallying cries that united people across racial and socioeconomic lines. During this time, the church committed itself to do the theological heavy lifting needed in order to find their voice in a text they were historically left out of. Through much diligence, prayer, fasting, unifying, protest, marching, lynchings, and church bombings, the church found itself in the biblical text due to its suffering. The enslavement of the Israel people drew a similarity to their black bodies working on plantations. The public execution of Jesus resonated with their glimpses of their fellow brothers and sisters hanging from trees like wet laundry. Just like Jesus, earthly vindication never came from him. But the all-powerful God, saw his suffering and raised him up from the dead, defying the unjust actions done by wicked men.

This version of Jesus—the Jesus who suffered, died, and was resurrected—brought hope to Black slaves and continues to provide hope for countless people today. For many, it is far more than an ancient tale or mere story; it is a living reminder that in the face of suffering, God is present with us through it all. The church has safeguarded this narrative across generations. Why? Because this story holds transformative power—the power to free the oppressed, to uplift the weary, and to remind us that redemption and liberation are always possible.

The worst thing that can be done to break anyone's belief in this is to attempt to undermine who Jesus died for.[9] To suggest that there were people who were left out and now these people (based on our current religious criteria) must be born again, must

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[9] Marcus Rogers, Will Horn, and Romell Parks-Weekly, *Marcus Rogers vs 2 Gay Pastors DEBATE: Can You Be GAY and CHRISTIAN*, filmed October 25, 2022, YouTube video, 1:56:12, posted by Marcus Rogers, October 25, 2022,

repent, or must undergo additional work to inherit what has already been given to them (which is eternal life) is cruel and a form of spiritual abuse.

Similarly, the church defended human rights as well as racial justice even at the cost of their own safety and protection. The abolitionist movements in the 19th century were often led by Christian clergy and congregations who recognized the moral imperative to fight against the institution of slavery. They did not simply allow the systems of their time to exist. They unified and created networks that would help liberate others from slavery. These networks is what allowed figures such as Harriet Tubman, an escaped enslaved woman and deeply spiritual leader, to invoke her faith to become a guiding force in her work to free others through the Underground Railroad. Churches were also instrumental in providing safe houses and resources for those escaping bondage, exemplifying their commitment to liberation. If equity would not be earned through government, many churches were deeply committed to ensuring that it did its part not to add to it.

Globally, the church has been at the forefront of other justice movements as well. In South Africa, religious leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu used their positions within the Anglican Church to denounce apartheid and advocate for reconciliation and equality. The South African Council of Churches played a critical role in supporting anti-apartheid efforts, embodying the church's mission to stand against systemic oppression.

While the church has often risen to the occasion as a champion for justice, this legacy is not without its complexities. There have been instances when the church has failed to confront its own complicity in systems of oppression. Some denominations historically supported slavery, segregation, and colonialism, using scripture to justify

these injustices. This duality serves as a reminder that the church's role in justice work is not inherent but must be continually cultivated and renewed. Those who were committed to change and progress earned it. Those who tried to force their will above God's Will created Christian hate movements and organizations such as The Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The Ku Klux Klan has historically presented itself as a Christian organization, using Christian symbols and rhetoric to justify its actions. However, its interpretation of Christianity is a distorted and exclusionary one, rooted in white supremacist ideology rather than the core tenets of the Christian faith. However, Christians who held on to their beliefs that God created a "superior race" led to violent extremes and killed people of color, Jews, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and anyone who did not fall within their ideology.

Today, many faith communities strive to build upon the dark times of this historical legacy by addressing modern injustices. Churches advocate for racial equity, criminal justice reform, and economic justice, working to dismantle systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality. By recognizing the intersectionality of race with issues such as gender, sexuality, and class, churches are evolving their understanding of what it means to stand with the oppressed in a rapidly changing world.

The church's enduring call to align with the oppressed is both a responsibility and an opportunity to reflect the inclusive and transformative love of God. Its advocacy for racial justice and equity is not just a historical achievement but an ongoing commitment that must adapt to the challenges of each generation. By embracing this mandate, the church can continue to serve as a beacon of hope, healing, and reconciliation for all.

Understanding how this discipline and theory coincide with my work is evident in my belief that the church must move beyond its rigid and often exclusionary understanding of sexuality. For too long, traditional interpretations of scripture and doctrine have been used to marginalize individuals whose sexual orientation or gender identity do not align with heteronormative expectations. To protect heteronormativity in our society individuals have become "hetero supremacist". Supremacy is the belief in superiority, advocacy for dominance, and exclusion or oppression of other (less dominant) groups.[10]

Scholars like McIntosh have identified three key characteristics of supremacism: belief in superiority, advocacy for dominance, and exclusion or oppression. Supremacy groups often have invoked religious beliefs, including references to God, to justify their ideologies and actions. Christians, both historically and in contemporary times, have been found complicit in sanctioning and perpetuating various forms of supremacy through theological interpretations, institutional practices, and social behaviors. These actions have included endorsing or enabling White Supremacy, incorporating Gender Supremacy into religious doctrines, motivating practices rooted in Dominionism, and fostering ideologies tied to Anti-Semitic, Anti-Muslim, and Anti-LGBTQ+ Christian groups. These forms of oppression have often been justified through selective readings of scripture and the manipulation of Christian teachings to maintain systems of power and control.

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[10] Peggy McIntosh, "On Privilege, Fraudulence, and Teaching As Learning," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 38, no. 19 (1992): B1–B2.

This limited perspective not only alienates but also contradicts the inclusive nature of Christ's message, which calls us to love and embrace all people without condition. Expanding the church's understanding of sexuality requires a willingness to engage with disciplines such as queer theory, which challenges binary thinking and offers a lens through which to view sexuality and identity as fluid, diverse, and integral to the human experience. By incorporating these insights, the church can reimagine its approach to inclusion, focusing on affirming the inherent worth of every individual rather than imposing restrictive and harmful norms.

The Queer Theory and along with my claim that equity can be seen as an effort to equalize the imbalance that has existed due to the intentional efforts to provide preferential treatment to a certain race, gender, and class of people is not merely a theoretical exercise but a practical and theological imperative. As my work demonstrates, many individuals marginalized by the church due to their sexuality are actively seeking spiritual communities where they can be fully seen, valued, and affirmed in their whole identities. These individuals, particularly QTPOC often face dual layers of exclusion—both from broader societal structures and within religious spaces that claim to embody love and justice. Such rejection can lead to deep spiritual wounds and a sense of disconnection from faith communities, which have historically been places of refuge and empowerment for marginalized groups.

Considering this, I have chosen to focus my observation on Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, a congregation that has boldly embraced its role as an affirming and welcoming space for QTPOC individuals. This church stands out as a testament to the possibility of inclusivity within faith traditions, offering a model of what it means to

embody radical hospitality in practice. Witherspoon Presbyterian Church not only opens its doors but also actively creates an environment where all people, regardless of their sexuality, gender identity, or race, can feel a genuine sense of belonging.

To achieve this, the church must engage in deep self-reflection, education, and dialogue. It must examine its doctrines and practices to identify where they perpetuate exclusion and harm, and it must be willing to adapt. This includes creating spaces for open conversations about sexuality, providing resources for education on queer theory and theology, and actively including LGBTQIA+ voices in leadership and decision-making.

This commitment is particularly striking given the broader context in which many churches in the surrounding area have resisted or outright rejected such inclusivity. Some of these churches are also part of the same Presbytery to which Witherspoon belongs, the White River Valley Presbytery. Witherspoon is a disruption to the status quo. They are bold in their blackness and ancestry connection to African traditions and bold in their affirmation of all people. By welcoming QTPOC individuals, Witherspoon challenges the norms of exclusion that persist in many religious spaces that have entrenched those beliefs in the hearts and minds of very few of its members. It serves as a reminder that the church can align its practices with the gospel's call to love unconditionally and to stand in solidarity with the oppressed.

Witherspoon Presbyterian Church's approach is not limited to passive inclusion but involves active affirmation, centering the voices and experiences of QTPOC within the life of the congregation. Through intentional programming, leadership opportunities, and a theology of radical inclusivity, the church demonstrates that faith and full

acceptance of diverse identities are not mutually exclusive. This approach not only meets the spiritual needs of those who have been historically excluded but also challenges other congregations to reflect on their own practices and move toward a more equitable and inclusive expression of faith. By observing Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, I aim to highlight how their efforts provide a pathway for other churches to follow, illustrating how affirming and welcoming spaces can heal wounds, foster spiritual growth, and demonstrate the transformative power of a truly inclusive community of faith.

As I expand their understanding of sexuality and hold interviews with members and leaders of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, I aim to uncover what is truly driving the growth of this church—not just in numbers, but in consciousness and spirit. By embracing a broader and more compassionate perspective, Witherspoon Presbyterian Church exemplifies how a faith community can become a true sanctuary for all, a place where every individual feels empowered to live authentically and fully in the light of God's grace.

This exploration is not merely about identifying what sets Witherspoon apart but also about reflecting on what their approach teaches the larger church. Their intentional inclusion of QTPOC and commitment to equity demonstrate that the church can move beyond the confines of rigid doctrines and societal norms to embody the radical love and justice of Christ. In a world where many individuals feel alienated from religious institutions, Witherspoon's work serves as a beacon of hope, illustrating that faith communities can be spaces of healing, affirmation, and growth.

The theological foundation of this church's mission aligns seamlessly with the principles of equity and queer theory. Just as Philip walked with the Ethiopian eunuch

without judgment or exclusion, Witherspoon Presbyterian Church walks with those who have been marginalized, meeting them where they are and affirming their full humanity. This act of walking together reflects a commitment not just to inclusion but to transformation—both for the individual and the congregation as a whole. By studying Witherspoon's practices and engaging with its members, I hope to contribute to a broader conversation about what it means to be the church in the 21st century. This includes addressing the harm that has been done in the name of faith, challenging systems of exclusion, and reimagining the church as a space that uplifts and empowers all people. Witherspoon Presbyterian Church's example reminds us that the gospel's call to love is not passive but active, requiring intentionality, courage, and an unwavering commitment to justice.

In closing, the work of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church inspires a vision of what the church can and should be—a community that not only welcomes the marginalized but celebrates them as vital parts of the body of Christ. I hope that this research sheds light on how churches can grow in consciousness, inclusivity, and spiritual depth, creating spaces where everyone can thrive in the fullness of their identity and faith. By embracing this path, the church can become a more faithful reflection of God's boundless love towards all people.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

If theology shapes a community's imagination, then the ways we interpret sacred belief determine how we see God, ourselves, and our neighbor. When a congregation's understanding of God is filtered through exclusion, bias, or fear, it risks distorting not only its mission but it's very identity as the Body of Christ and its ability to offer impactful ministry in its community. A church that has not reconciled its theology with the fullness of human diversity can become alienated from its divine calling that calls us to embody love and justice.

Just as individuals can internalize distorted theologies about who they are, congregations can inherit and perpetuate harmful narratives that estrange them from the liberating work of God in their midst. Many communities of faith today face this tension. They are asking themselves the question, how to remain faithful to Scripture while embracing the sacred worth of every person. My project, *Reclaiming the Black Church's Prophetic Voice: Queering Sacred Belief and Centering the Lives of Black Queer and Trans People*, seeks to analyze this very dilemma of how faith communities, particularly within the Black Church tradition, can move from performative inclusion toward a lived theology of affirmation, where diversity itself becomes sacramental and DEI is practiced as a form of discipleship.

In the congregational context from which this project emerges, the story of faith and transformation spans more than 185 years. Throughout its history, this community has been compelled by the Spirit to evolve in response to the shifting needs of its people and the pressing cries of the world around it. Each generation has been invited to discern anew what it means to be the Church as they seek to embody God's justice, mercy, and inclusion in its own time. This ongoing process of imagining and reimagining the Church's vocation has shaped a congregation that refuses to treat inclusion as a mere programmatic goal or a superficial gesture of welcome. Instead, inclusion has become woven into the very fabric of its theological identity. The community has learned that to follow Christ is to continually expand the table, to challenge inherited boundaries, and to see the image of God reflected in every human being.

It is from within this living tradition of adaptive faithfulness that this project takes root. The congregation's commitment to transformation provides fertile ground for exploring how queering sacred belief can further awaken its prophetic witness. This work calls the church to move beyond tolerance toward a radical embrace of all God's people, especially those whose identities have too often been marginalized or erased within the faith community. It is clear that Witherspoon Presbyterian Church has begun doing the critical work to ensure that the church is not a place for some, but a place for all. When I first arrived at Witherspoon, I was pleasantly surprised when I found out their public affirmation included LGBTQ+ individuals. Their credo, which is posted on their website, and spoken at each of their services, and is found in their program speaks to their intentionality about being an open and affirming space. Their credo reads:

> "For nearly two centuries, Witherspoon Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis, IN has been an oasis of hope for countless generations of faithful seekers in need of refuge and community. As one of the oldest African American Presbyterian Churches in the nation, we are an open and affirming community of faith, steeped in the Black religious tradition, committed to social justice, and empowered by the Living Gospel of Jesus Christ to transform the world, one life at a time. In the Spirit of John 3:16, we are a "Whosoever" community. Regardless of your age, race, faith journey, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, family makeup, social status, income, ability, or physical or mental health, we welcome you with the Unconditional Love of Jesus Christ. Together, we are striving to become the kind of Church described in Acts 2:47, where there is relevant teaching, heart-felt worship, authentic relationships, fervent prayer, and compassionate care for those in need. All who dare believe, come, and sit at the Table of God alongside us as we light candles of hope, seek the lost, clothe the naked, offer refuge to the orphan, care for the widow, inspire the eager, and empower the hearts of all."

Although this credo of inclusion is deeply embedded in the life and language of the church, it is my observation that many within the congregation continue to wrestle with what I describe as *performative inclusivity*. The intention to welcome all is sincere and heartfelt, yet the practice of inclusion often remains symbolic rather than systemic expressed in gestures or statements rather than in sustained ministry and relational engagement. To illustrate this reality, I examined the congregation's interaction with the LGBTQ+ community through its programs, outreach, and partnerships. While the church

often affirms love and belonging in its preaching and public witness, it has not yet developed ministries that intentionally nurture the spiritual and emotional well-being of its LGBTQ+ members. Likewise, it has not established formal collaborations with queer-led or queer-affirming organizations that already serve the surrounding community.

Outside of Pride Month observances, there is minimal consistent engagement that lifts the lived experiences or theological voices of LGBTQ+ people within the congregation. This absence does not necessarily reflect resistance but rather a gap between intention and embodiment which is a sign that the church's inclusive credo, while genuine, still longs to take deeper root in the life and practice of the community.

While the church has witnessed an encouraging increase in openly queer congregants becoming part of its fellowship, true inclusion cannot be measured merely by presence or participation, it must be reflected in practice, structure, and spirit. Inclusion that is performative may appear progressive on the surface, yet it falls short of the prophetic call to embody God's justice and radical love. For inclusion to be truly transformative, it must move beyond symbolic gestures to intentionally meet the real needs of queer and trans congregants in spiritual, emotional, and communal ways.

Prophetic inclusion requires the church to lift the stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ members as sacred testimonies of faith, resilience, and divine image-bearing. It must also create intentional, strategic relationships with organizations, movements, and ministries that affirm and advocate for queer people within the wider community. Such engagement cannot rest on the shoulders of individual members acting independently or informally "representing" the church in queer spaces. Rather, it must be a collective

witness, a unified expression of the congregation's commitment to justice, healing, and the full inclusion of all God's children in both word and deed.

If Witherspoon Presbyterian Church is to embody the spirit of a true "whosoever" ministry as revealed in John 3:16, it must move beyond statements of welcome toward practices of radical belonging. The Gospel promise that "whosoever believes" extends an invitation without condition, yet many queer and trans individuals have encountered the Church not as a source of liberation but as a site of rejection, silence, and spiritual harm. Within Witherspoon's own pews are parishioners who carry the weight of these lived experiences. Stories of exclusion that have shaped their faith and, in some cases, fractured their trust in the Church itself. For Witherspoon to live into its calling as a safe and affirming space, it must not only extend open arms but also engage in intentional listening, confession, and healing work that acknowledges this pain. To minister authentically to the queer community, the congregation must understand the social, theological, and emotional contexts from which its LGBTQ+ members come from and be willing to stand prophetically in those spaces of tension and transformation.

This leads to the central hypothesis of this project: *If ministry leaders participate in a symposium (or conference or workshop) about affirming LGBTQIA+ and QTPOC+ individuals, then they will be equipped to promote healing and inclusion within the church and the surrounding community.* The purpose of this hypothesis is not only to measure the impact of education and dialogue, but to test whether intentional theological formation can shift pastoral practice and congregational culture. By creating a structured space for learning and reflection ministry leaders are invited to confront their own

theological biases, expand their understanding of gender and sexuality, and reimagine the Church's pastoral response through a lens of affirmation and justice.

Such a symposium represents more than an academic exercise; it is a sacred intervention. An opportunity for the Spirit to work through conversation, storytelling, and shared lament to cultivate empathy and transformation. When leaders are equipped with both theological insight and practical tools, they are more capable of guiding congregations toward ministries of repair and renewal that honor the imago Dei within every person.

Methodology

Ultimately, this project seeks to demonstrate that education grounded in queer theology and pastoral praxis can serve as a catalyst for reclaiming the Black Church's prophetic witness towards a portion of society that has not been privileged to experience the black church through its prophetic justice-leaning way. These leaders can influence the rest of the congregation into allied advocates willing to stand in the gap between our credo and ministry embodiment.

Methodology

The Methodology used for this research project included the following:

1. Pre-research survey (See Appendix B)
2. Post-research survey (See Appendix B)
3. Group Discussions
4. Focused Participant Journals (See Appendix I)

During the implementation of this project, it became apparent that while several ministry leaders and congregants expressed interest in participating, a smaller number than anticipated committed to completing both the surveys and full symposium experience. Recognizing that limited participation could potentially reduce the project's capacity to create meaningful congregational impact, I adapted the approach to maximize engagement and allowed for leaders in the church who did not have an official church leadership function but were still vital to the life of the church, to also have the opportunity to join the research. In addition to the symposium itself, I incorporated elements of worship and communal storytelling that extended the learning experience beyond a single event.

To ensure that participants could encounter the material in ways that resonated with their individual learning styles and spiritual temperaments, the project intentionally integrated multiple modalities of engagement:[1]

- Visual: Slide presentations, media clips, and visual storytelling highlighting queer faith narratives.
- Aural: Testimonies and music that uplifted themes of inclusion, lament, and hope.
- Physical: Embodied exercises during sessions, inviting participants to reflect on belonging and exclusion through movement and posture.
- Verbal: Group discussions, theological dialogue, and prayer circles that centered diverse voices.
- Social: Collaborative activities encouraging peer learning and shared accountability among ministry leaders.

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[1] Learning Styles," accessed November 9, 2025. https://learning-styles-online.com/overview/.

- Solitary: Journaling and private reflection to internalize key insights and moments of conviction.
- Logical: Structured theological frameworks connecting queer theory, pastoral praxis, and biblical interpretation.

As the project unfolded, it became essential to employ a variety of modalities that would help participants gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex subjects being presented. The intention was to ensure that participants were not only intellectually stimulated but also emotionally and spiritually engaged throughout the learning process. Utilizing multiple vehicles of learning, such as discussion, reflection, storytelling, and embodied practice, allowed participants to encounter the material in ways that spoke to both the head and the heart.

These varied forms of engagement created space for participants to process information deeply, draw their own theological conclusions, and wrestle honestly with their personal convictions about inclusion, justice, and the Church's prophetic responsibility in it. This is how I tried to effect change. Rather than prescribing a single interpretive lens, the project invited an atmosphere of discovery. Such atmosphere allowed participants to experience the tension between traditional belief systems and emerging affirming theologies. Through a series of workshops, we explored biblical, social, and spiritual impacts of understanding our faith through inclusive practices and understandings.

I chose to design this project in this way because sexuality is not merely spiritual, but it is embodied, relational, and deeply intertwined with how individuals experience God, self, and community. For too long, the Church has often treated sexuality as a topic

of doctrine rather than a dimension of discipleship, reducing complex human experiences to abstract theological debates. This approach recognizes that transformation rarely occurs through information alone; it emerges through experience, vulnerability, and dialogue. Experience allows participants to encounter theology in lived form, grounding abstract ideas about inclusion, justice, and sexuality in the real stories and emotions of those who have been shaped by the Church's witness, for better or for worse.

Vulnerability opens the heart to transformation, inviting participants to confront their own biases, fears, and unspoken assumptions while being held within a community of grace. Dialogue, in turn, becomes a sacred exchange. The use of group discussions, focused journaling, and surveys allowed participants to engage in ways that were most comfortable to them so that they can tell their stories, share their truths, or speak their pain in ways that would invite other participants in (if desired) or keep other participants out. Regardless of how liberal or conservative participants wanted to be in their sharing, they method gave them a way of maintaining their comfort while standing in their truth. In this sense, the project treated conversations not merely as a pedagogical tool but as a spiritual practice. Through intentional listening and storytelling, participants were encouraged to see one another as theological texts, living testimonies of how divine love persists even amid exclusion and harm.

Ultimately, it was my goal that through participation in this study, there would be evidence of both affective (emotional and empathetic) and conative (motivational and behavioral) transformation. In other words, participants would not only feel differently about LGBTQIA+ and QTPOC+ inclusion but would also be inspired to act

differently and to embody these convictions through ministry practices that affirm the sacred worth of every individual.

To address this hypothesis, the project invited fourteen members of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church who regularly engage with the congregation either through in-person worship and ministry activities or through virtual participation in the church's online community. Each member was encouraged to participate in seven sessions over the course of six weeks. We would meet on two Sundays and five Wednesdays in total. Along the journey, participants will be addressing not just the hypothesis but also helping to solve the problem at hand. There have been many Black and Brown LGBTQIA+ individuals (QTPOC+) within Witherspoon Presbyterian Church who have experienced rejection, silence, or theological erasure from religious spaces, which has led to emotional and spiritual harm, and caused a deep mistrust of the church as a place of refuge and justice. The churches that they have come from were unwilling to explicitly affirm their identities and experiences has created a climate of alienation and spiritual disconnection.

Membership within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is defined in the Book of Order as encompassing both active and affiliate members.[2] Active membership refers to individuals who have made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, have been baptized, and have been received into the fellowship of a particular congregation through confirmation, reaffirmation, or letter of transfer. These members participate fully in the worship, governance, and mission of the church. Affiliate members, by contrast, are those who

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[2] Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *Book of Order 2023–2025: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II.*(Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2023), G-1.0401–G-1.0403.

hold active membership in another congregation but wish to participate regularly in the life and ministry of a different church community, often due to temporary residence or special circumstance. Together, these categories express the Presbyterian understanding that membership is not merely a status, but a covenantal relationship rooted in discipleship, shared mission, and participation in the body of Christ.

Implementation

Both active and affiliate members were engaged in this six-week course (See Appendix E). The group had representation from individuals of various cultural backgrounds, ages, genders, and sexual orientations, which provided a balanced data set (See Appendix H and Appendix F). Members who took part in the study did so of their own desire, and no one was solicited directly by the researcher to take part in the study. General announcements were shared with the congregation during our worship services leading up to the first session. Also, direct emails went out to the congregation, sharing with them about the six-week course and providing them with information on how to sign up.

In my initial proposal, I had anticipated a total participant size between eight to twelve people. Although I reached fourteen, I was eager to try to increase volunteers by sending out more emails to the congregation in the hope of driving participation. During the time of these announcements, our church held a Pride Celebration, and most of our participants registered for the 6-week course during this service. Although that was not deliberate, and very much coincidental, I believe that service drew a response as we lifted

the experiences of LGBTQ+ Christians in our very congregation. Of the fourteen participants who joined, all fourteen completed the pre-research project survey.

A total of fourteen participants completed the full six-week project. Participants represented a cross-section of Witherspoon Presbyterian Church's congregational and community life, including ministry leaders, lay members, and individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ or as allies committed to fostering inclusion within the Black Church context. The age ranged from 26 to 67 years of age. All participants identified with their gender assigned at birth. Present in this study were two genders, male and female. Various sexual orientations were included:

- 1 Asexual
- 0 Bisexual
- 4 Gay
- 2 Lesbian
- 0 Pansexual
- 7 Heterosexual

Participants self-identified across a spectrum of sexual orientations, reflecting the diversity present within both the congregation and the broader body of Christ. Understanding these orientations is vital to interpreting the lived experiences, theological perspectives, and pastoral implications that emerged through the project. The following definitions are provided to ensure clarity of each orientation (See Appendix J).

- Asexual – Refers to individuals who experience little to no sexual attraction to others. Asexuality exists on a continuum; some asexual people may experience romantic or emotional attraction without sexual desire.

- Bisexual – Denotes attraction to more than one gender, often both men and women, though not necessarily in the same way or degree. While no participants in this study identified as bisexual, the category remains important for understanding the breadth of sexual diversity represented in broader LGBTQIA+ communities.
- Gay – Describes individuals who experience romantic and/or sexual attraction primarily to people of the same gender. Four participants identified as gay men.
- Lesbian – Refers to women who experience romantic and/or sexual attraction primarily to other women. Two participants identified as lesbian.
- Pansexual – Characterizes attraction to individuals regardless of gender identity or biological sex. While no participants identified as pansexual, the term was discussed during group dialogue as an example of how evolving understandings of gender and attraction challenge binary thinking in both society and theology.
- Heterosexual – Refers to individuals who experience romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of a different gender. Seven participants identified as heterosexual and served as important allies within the group.

Participants also represented a diverse range of tenure within Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, reflecting both long-standing congregational roots before the church became open and affirming and newer congregants who came after the church became open and affirming (See Appendix G). The variation in length of membership provided valuable insight into how differing levels of church integration and history influenced perceptions of inclusion, leadership, and belonging.

Among the fourteen participants, eight had been members for over 15 years, identifying as lifelong Presbyterians deeply embedded in the church's traditional culture and governance. Four participants had joined within the past five to ten years, representing a transitional group that entered the church during its ongoing efforts to modernize its mission. The remaining two participants were relatively new members (less than five years) who had intentionally sought out Witherspoon for its emerging identity as an affirming and justice-centered congregation.

Attendance and engagement remained strong across this diverse cohort. Because the project was intentionally scheduled during the congregation's regular Wednesday evening Christian Education hour, participants were already accustomed to gathering at that time, which significantly reduced scheduling conflicts. All fourteen participants attended the initial session, and attendance remained consistent throughout the series. The only exception occurred during Session Four, when two individuals were absent due to a previously disclosed scheduling conflict. These absences had been communicated ahead of time and did not reflect attrition or disengagement. No participants withdrew at any point during the implementation. One participant experienced a mental health crisis involving a same-gender-loving family member. She later shared that her participation in the sessions equipped her with the skills and confidence to respond with greater care. She also noted that the series helped her identify where to seek affirming support for her family member during the crisis. However, throughout this crisis she remained deeply engaged, signally that her participation was not just a motion she was going through, but a deeply transformative journey.

Although each session was originally designed for 60–75 minutes, the depth of theological reflection and personal sharing often extended conversations beyond the planned timeframe. Participants were encouraged to bring food, and I provided snacks and drinks to help ensure people felt comfortable and could discuss together over a meal or light snacks. I also noted that participants regularly remained after the formal close of the session to continue dialogue, ask questions, or share additional insights, indicating a high level of investment and growing communal trust. Several participants arrived early each week to help prepare the space, demonstrating a shared sense of ownership and commitment to the process.

Several participants contacted me during the week with follow-up questions related to the lessons, often seeking clarification or wanting to explore a particular concept more deeply. These mid-week conversations revealed that their engagement extended well beyond the structured sessions and that the material was prompting ongoing reflection. In addition to these direct questions, certain phrases, metaphors, or frameworks introduced during the gatherings became recurring points of reference. Participants would repeat these phrases (sometimes humorously or playfully) when we encountered one another at other congregational events, committee meetings, or Sunday worship.

Although lighthearted in tone, these comments served as meaningful indicators of learning. The repetition of key ideas in casual conversation demonstrated that the material had become memorable and integrated into their internal processing throughout the week. It also revealed a growing shared language within the group. The fact that participants carried these concepts into informal interactions suggests that the project not

only informed their theological understanding but also shaped their day-to-day relational patterns and communal discourse.

The final session was structured as both a reflective gathering and a communal celebration of the work the participants completed together. We began with an opening prayer, grounding ourselves in gratitude and setting a sacred tone for the time we would share. This brief moment of centering invited participants to acknowledge the spiritual dimension of their journey and prepare their hearts for honest reflection.

Participants were then given time to complete the post-project questionnaire. This period was intentionally unhurried, allowing individuals to thoughtfully evaluate their experiences, articulate shifts in understanding, and identify areas of personal and communal growth. The quiet atmosphere of this activity helped underscore the seriousness of their contributions and honored their voices as key components of the project's final assessment. Following the questionnaires, we moved into a guided review of key insights that emerged throughout the series. This portion of the gathering functioned both as a recap and a communal witness to the transformation that had occurred. Participants reflected aloud on moments that challenged them, themes that resonated, and practices that they hoped to carry forward. Several shared ways in which the series had already influenced their conversations with family members, interactions in the congregation, or personal spiritual practices. This time provided space for the group to acknowledge not only individual growth but also the shared vocabulary and mutual understanding that had taken shape over the weeks together.

We then transitioned to a discussion about next steps. This conversation invited participants to consider how the insights gained during the project might inform the

ongoing life of the congregation. Questions such as “What will we do with what we’ve learned?” and “How can we commit to continued transformation?” encouraged participants to think beyond the confines of the project and imagine how the practices of affirmation, awareness, and trauma-informed care might shape future ministries. Suggestions included continued study, broader congregational engagement, and intentional mentoring relationships to sustain the work that had begun.

Before closing, I offered words of gratitude to each participant for their openness, dedication, and willingness to engage deeply with challenging material. This moment of acknowledgment recognized the emotional labor and vulnerability that the project required, affirming the courage and generosity each participant brought to the process. We concluded with a brief closing ritual. Participants were invited to take part in a symbolic act, which was a communal gesture that marked the end of our shared journey and the beginning of continued growth. Whether through lighting a candle, sharing personal affirmations, or offering blessings to one another, the ritual provided a tangible expression of hope and commitment. It served as a reminder that the work we began together did not end with the final session; rather, it planted seeds for ongoing transformation within the congregation.

As part of this embodied journey, each session built upon the last in both content and spiritual depth. The workshops were intentionally sequenced to guide participants from foundational concepts to deeper practices of awareness, affirmation, and communal healing. During the series of workshops, we covered the following themes and learning experiences:

- Week 1 – Orientation & Introduction to the Project: Sunday, June 15, 2025
- Week 2 – Theological Foundation: Prophetic Imagination & Liberation: Wednesday, June 18, 2025
- Week 3 – Interdisciplinary Foundation: Cultural Identity, Marginalization, and Psychological Impact: Wednesday, June 25, 2025
- Week 4 – DEI Principles in Practice: Hospitality, Inclusion, and Dismantling Bias: Wednesday, July 2, 2025
- Week 5 – Scripture Study: Acts 8 and Honoring the Stranger: Wednesday, July 9, 2025
- Week 6 – Dialogue: Addressing Bias, Building Trust: Wednesday, July 16, 2025
- Week 7 – Evaluation & Forward Movement: Sunday, July 20, 2025

During our first session of Week 1, I held an in-person orientation for all participants who expressed interest in joining the six-week cohort. Remarkably, all fourteen individuals who signed up were present and fully engaged, demonstrating a strong collective commitment from the very beginning. This initial gathering served not only as an introduction to the structure of the series but also as a grounding moment. I walked the group through the overarching purpose of the project, the themes we would explore in the coming weeks, and the expectations for participation.

I emphasized that this space was intentionally designed as a place of honesty, healing, and growth, one where each person's lived experience would be both welcomed and valued. We discussed how the cohort would navigate theological reflection,

storytelling, and identity formation, and I encouraged everyone to consider how their personal narratives intersect with communal transformation. Most importantly, I invited participants to show up as their full selves, without pretense or reservation, so that together we might cultivate the kind of authentic change that can only emerge from authentic presence.

Each participant was given time in the space to take their pre-project questionnaire independently. Participants were encouraged to answer thoughtfully and without pressure, knowing that their responses would help shape the direction of the cohort and provide a baseline for understanding their experiences and needs. This moment of individual assessment set the foundation for more meaningful group dialogue in the weeks ahead. This baseline understanding, awareness, and spiritual discernment would serve as the foundation from which all things would be analyzed. If participants have a change in understanding, awareness, and spiritual discernment at the end of the cohort, such changes (or non-changers) are what I would conclude as the effectiveness or the ineffectiveness of this program.

The pre-questionnaire consisted of the following questions:

1. What does it mean to be a prophetic church in today's world?
2. How would you describe your current understanding of equity and inclusion within the Black Church?
3. What do you understand about QTPOC (Queer and Trans People of Color) identities and their relationship to the Black Church?
4. Who do you believe are the most marginalized in the church today, and why?

5. When, if ever, have you witnessed or participated in conversations about QTPOC inclusion in a church setting?
6. Why do you believe some churches struggle with affirming LGBTQIA+ individuals?
7. How prepared do you feel to advocate for marginalized individuals in your church setting?
8. What theological ideas or scriptures inform your view on inclusion?

The responses to this question revealed a wide range of interpretations and theological perspectives. Participants approached the idea of a prophetic church from multiple angles (spiritual, social, ethical, and pastoral), demonstrating that there is no single, universally held definition among the group. Instead, each respondent drew from their own lived experience, faith background, and personal convictions, resulting in a rich tapestry of insights. Together, these diverse responses highlight the complexity of prophetic identity within contemporary church life and underscore the need for broader conversations about what "prophetic" witness means today.

When asked, "What does it mean to be a prophetic church in today's world?" Most respondents described a prophetic church as one that speaks truth with unwavering courage, standing firm even when that truth disrupts comfort or challenges prevailing norms. Participants emphasized that a prophetic church does more than preach comforting messages. It names injustice directly, sheds light on the hidden or ignored wounds of society, and calls both secular institutions and the Church itself into honest accountability. This kind of truth-telling requires a willingness to confront systems of harm, to advocate for those whose voices are silenced, and to resist the temptation to

soften or dilute the Gospel for the sake of popularity or institutional safety. Respondents suggested that a truly prophetic church refuses to compromise the message of Christ, even when doing so might cost influence, reputation, or ease. In this view, prophetic ministry is grounded not in human opinion but in God's revelation, revealing a church that discerns God's truth, declares it boldly, and uses that truth as a moral compass to guide individual lives and collective transformation. Ultimately, participants saw the prophetic church as a courageous witness, one that holds a mirror to the world, speaks with moral clarity, and embodies the conviction that truth spoken in love has the power to heal, correct, and liberate.

In addition to truth-telling, respondents also framed a prophetic church as one that is deeply committed to justice and liberation, particularly for those who have been marginalized or oppressed. Many participants connected the prophetic calling with active advocacy, standing in solidarity with those who suffer, challenging systems that perpetuate harm, and working toward equitable structures within both church and society. For them, being prophetic is not solely about declaring God's truth from the pulpit; it is about embodying that truth through concrete action. This includes pursuing equity, disrupting patterns of discrimination, and participating in efforts that seek the transformation of social, political, and spiritual landscapes. Within this understanding, the prophetic church becomes an agent of liberation, demonstrating that authentic prophecy is not passive or purely verbal but deeply engaged, justice-oriented, and committed to the flourishing of all people.

Summary of Learning

During the first session, we devoted significant time to exploring what it means for a church to be prophetic. Establishing this shared understanding was essential, as it would serve as a foundational lens through which we engaged all future sessions. I recognized that the group needed to develop a collective definition, one that could ground our conversations, guide our interpretations, and offer a common framework for analyzing the themes we would later encounter. Based on their pre-questionnaires and our collective discussion, the group formed an understanding that suggests a prophetic church *is one that courageously speaks God's truth, confronts injustice, and actively works toward the liberation and flourishing of marginalized communities. It is a church rooted in revelation, compelled by justice, and committed to transformative action.* Having formed this working definition, we proceeded to close.

Building upon the shared definition of a prophetic church developed in Week 1, the second session invited participants to deepen their understanding by grounding the concept of prophecy within the biblical tradition and the historical arc of Black Liberation Theology. We opened the gathering in prayer, acknowledging the spiritual weight of the conversation before us and asking for the kind of holy imagination that enables communities to envision God's future amid the constraints of the present. This prayerful beginning helped re-center the group, preparing us to trace the prophetic witness from Scripture into the lived experiences of Black communities today.

The teaching session began with an exploration of the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Bible, focusing particularly on figures such as Amos and Isaiah, whose ministries exemplified the fusion of divine revelation, social critique, and justice-oriented

hope. Participants considered how Amos's blunt denunciation of exploitation ("let justice roll down like waters") and Isaiah's call to defend the oppressed established a scriptural lineage in which prophecy is inseparable from liberation. From these texts, we examined Jesus as a prophet. One who confronted religious hypocrisy, uplifted marginalized people, and announced the inbreaking of God's reign as good news to the poor. Naming Jesus within the prophetic tradition challenged participants to see prophecy not as a fringe spiritual gift but as a central dimension of Christian discipleship and communal life.

This foundation opened space to explore Black Liberation Theology, which interprets Scripture through the lived realities of Black suffering, resilience, and freedom movements. Before engaging in Queer Liberation Theology, or introducing it as a topic, I wanted to begin with a form of liberation theology that many of them were exposed to from being a member at Witherspoon. Participants learned how leaders like James Cone, Kelly Brown Douglas, and contemporary prophetic voices understand God as being decisively on the side of the oppressed. This theological lens illuminated how the Black Church has historically carried prophetic responsibility, often speaking against racial injustice, organizing communities for collective survival, and envisioning freedom beyond the violent constraints of white supremacy. Connecting these traditions helped the group see prophecy not as abstract idealism but as a practical, embodied commitment to overturning systems that diminish human dignity.

Throughout the teaching, participants were encouraged to reflect on how prophetic imagination functions in community. We discussed how Walter Brueggemann's notion of "prophetic imagination" invites the Church to both critique the

unjust realities of the present and energize the possibility of a transformed future. This dual movement resonated strongly with the group's developing definition from Week 1; many noted that prophetic identity requires a willingness to dream of liberation while also confronting the forces that resist it. As one participant observed, "A prophetic church cannot simply point out what is wrong; it must compel us toward what is possible."

Following the teaching, the group engaged in a guided discussion. The first question, "What challenged or surprised you in this teaching?" elicited thoughtful responses. Some participants expressed surprise at how consistently the biblical prophets connected spiritual fidelity with social justice, especially in texts that framed worship itself as meaningless when separated from concern for the vulnerable. Others were challenged by the realization that Jesus's prophetic authority often placed him in direct tension with religious institutions. This insight prompted deeper reflection on the contemporary Church's tendency to avoid conflict for the sake of institutional self-preservation. Still others named how Black Liberation Theology provided language for experiences they had long felt but never theologized, giving spiritual legitimacy to the pursuit of justice as a core Christian practice.

The second question, "Can the church be prophetic without affirming all identities in its midst?" generated honest and at times vulnerable conversation. Many participants observed that a church cannot claim prophetic identity if it reproduces the same forms of exclusion, silence, or harm that the biblical prophets denounced. Several noted that the prophetic call to stand with the oppressed must include LGBTQ+ people, women, Black immigrants, people living with HIV, and others who have historically been marginalized within religious spaces. Others reflected that affirmation is not merely an act of welcome

but a theological commitment. In this context, participants concluded that prophecy requires not only speaking against injustice externally but also confronting the Church's internal complicity in systems of exclusion.

We concluded the session with a time of reflection and prayer, inviting participants to sit with the theological insights they had encountered and to discern how these themes might reshape their understanding of the Church's identity and responsibility. This closing moment helped integrate the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of the session, grounding our discussion in a posture of humility and openness before God. Participants were handed a journal that they were to take home and would be tasked with journaling throughout the week to capture their thoughts, feelings, and personal stories. These journals would later be data that I would use to measure change and impact as the weeks go by. As we ended in prayer, participants expressed a renewed sense of clarity: that prophetic witness is not only about confronting injustice but also about cultivating communities where liberation, affirmation, and sacred imagination are made visible and accessible to all.

Week 3 expanded the groundwork established in the previous sessions by shifting our attention from biblical and theological foundations to the interdisciplinary realities that shape the lived experiences of queer and trans people of color (QTPOC+) within faith communities. We began, as in previous weeks, with prayer. This prayer invited God to help us examine systems of harm with honesty while also holding space for the healing and insight that such examination can bring. The teaching session positioned Queer Theory, Intersectionality, and psychological research on spiritual trauma as tools for theological reflection and congregational understanding. We began by

exploring Audre Lorde's insistence that "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives." This provided an entry point for understanding how race, gender identity, sexuality, class, and faith interact to shape individuals' experiences within religious spaces. Lorde's framework encouraged participants to see identity not as fragmented parts but as an interwoven whole, but one that is deeply affected by systems of oppression or affirmation within the Church.

From there, we engaged bell hooks' insights on belonging and community, exploring how faith spaces can become either sources of profound healing or profound harm. Hooks's writings helped the group reflect on how religious institutions have historically policed people's bodies, relationships, gender expressions, and desires. Her call for communities shaped by love as a transformative ethic challenged participants to consider whether their own church contexts create room for the flourishing of diverse identities or whether they perpetuate silence and exclusion.

This discussion set the stage for introducing intersectionality, drawing from the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and scholars who have applied this lens to spirituality and queer identity. Participants learned how intersecting identities, being Black, queer, trans, poor, female, immigrant, or living with HIV, compound the vulnerability individuals face when entering religious spaces that may affirm some aspects of their identity while rejecting others. Through this lens, participants began to recognize the unique spiritual burdens carried by QTPOC+ individuals who navigate multiple systems of marginalization simultaneously.

We then turned to clinical research on spiritual trauma and the psychological impact of religious rejection. Studies on internalized shame, minority stress, and

family/church-based rejection among QTPOC+ individuals revealed patterns of depression, anxiety, suicidality, and chronic hypervigilance. QTPOC mental health was impacted more than non-QTPOC. Participants were deeply moved by findings showing how spiritual condemnation can fracture one's sense of self-worth and connection to God. Several noted that this research helped name experiences long felt but not previously articulated within their church context.

During the discussion portion, the first question, "What systems of marginalization show up in our own faith community?", led to intensive reflection. Participants identified heteronormativity, respectability politics, gendered expectations of leadership, and silence around sexuality as recurring barriers. Some acknowledged that, though unintentional, some of our church practices privilege cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class experiences. Others highlighted how roles and responsibilities in worship spaces often reinforce rigid binaries or cultural norms that exclude queer and trans bodies.

We closed the session with a time of reflection and prayer, inviting participants to hold the weight of what they had learned while also seeking God's guidance for how their community might become a place of healing rather than trauma. The prayer centered on release, truth-telling, and the courage to imagine new ways of being church. Participants were again encouraged to journal throughout the week, documenting their responses to the research, their reflections on Lorde and hooks, and any personal memories or emotions that surfaced. The session ended with a deepened awareness that liberation must be both theological and psychological, addressing not only the systems that harm but also the wounds those systems leave behind.

Week 4 marked a pivotal transition from theory to practice. Building on the prophetic framework of Week 1, the liberation-centered theology of Week 2, and the interdisciplinary insights of Week 3, this session focused on how Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) can be understood (and enacted) within a congregational setting. As always, we began with prayer, grounding the group in a posture of humility and openness to transformation. The prayer specifically asked God to reveal the biases we carry consciously or unconsciously and to empower the church to embody radical hospitality in ways that reflect God's inclusive love.

The teaching session opened by defining DEI within the context of the Christian community. Participants explored how diversity speaks to who is present, equity addresses how power and resources are distributed, and inclusion asks whether people can fully participate and flourish. We reviewed real-life case studies from churches that had implemented robust inclusion models, including congregations that expanded their leadership structures to include LGBTQ+ members, reformed their liturgical language to be gender-expansive, adopted trauma-informed pastoral care practices, and created policies that prioritized accessibility and belonging for people across identities.

We examined examples of faith communities in our city that moved beyond symbolic gestures, such as rainbow flags or welcoming statements, to substantive structural changes. These churches included Life Journey Church and Broadway United Methodist Church. These case studies illustrated how churches can revise bylaws, incorporate anti-racism and LGBTQ+ competency training, create pastoral roles dedicated to member care, and establish accountability systems for addressing harm.

Participants were particularly struck by examples where inclusion reshaped not only programs but also the spiritual culture of the congregation, making visible a commitment to justice that aligned with the prophetic imagination explored in earlier weeks.

The teaching also addressed the nature of bias, exploring how implicit biases quietly shape congregational life. We discussed how bias can influence everything from who is believed in moments of conflict, to who is centered in worship aesthetics, to whose pain is given urgency. Participants reflected on how unexamined biases often perpetuate inequity, even in communities that believe themselves to be welcoming.

We closed the session with a period of reflection and prayer, acknowledging the courage required to embody DEI values in faith communities that may resist change. The prayer invited the Holy Spirit to guide the congregation toward practices of radical hospitality rooted in justice, humility, and love. Participants were asked to continue journaling, particularly reflecting on where they see bias in themselves, in the church, and in the broader community. The session concluded with a renewed understanding that inclusion is not the endpoint, but rather an ongoing, active practice of transforming community life so that every person's dignity is honored and their gifts are welcomed.

Week 5 invited the group to turn directly to Scripture once again, this time centering on Acts 8:26–40, the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. This story is where my research project stems from. It is a story that powerfully illustrates divine inclusion, Spirit-led transformation, and the honoring of those who occupy the margins of society. As in previous sessions, we began with prayer, asking God to open our hearts to new insights and to help us see this biblical narrative not as an ancient text

alone but as a living witness to how the Spirit continues to move beyond boundaries the Church often constructs.

The teaching session began with a close reading of the story. Participants traced the narrative arc: Philip being called away from familiar ministry to a deserted road; the Ethiopian Eunuch traveling in spiritual curiosity; the moment of encounter mediated by Scripture; and the Eunuch's bold desire for baptism. We explored the historical and cultural context, how Ethiopian identity in this period was associated with Blackness, foreignness, and distance from the center of Roman life. We also discussed what it meant for someone to be a eunuch, a gender-variant or non-conforming figure who, according to Deuteronomic law, was excluded from temple participation. This layered marginalization illuminated how profound it is that Acts presents the Eunuch not as an outsider to be corrected, but as a bearer of theological curiosity and spiritual dignity.

The group reflected on how divine initiative shapes the entire encounter. The Spirit sends Philip to a place he would not have chosen and directs him to draw near to someone whom religious tradition might have taught him to avoid. This prompted participants to consider how the Spirit often disrupts comfort, urging the Church toward unlikely relationships that hold transformative potential. We also discussed the mutual vulnerability in the story: Philip is vulnerable in leaving his established ministry; the Eunuch is vulnerable in asking questions about Scripture; together they embody a mutual openness to God and to each other.

Participants were struck by how the Eunuch, despite being marginalized, is the one who asks the decisive theological question: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" This question became a centerpiece of our conversation. It reframes inclusion

not as a gift bestowed by the powerful, but as a divine right that precedes human gatekeeping. When Philip responds by baptizing the Eunuch with no hesitation, no test, and no doctrinal examination, participants saw a direct challenge to contemporary practices that create barriers around belonging.

As we began our group conversation after the teaching, I posed this question to ground our discussion: "Who are the 'Ethiopian Eunuchs' in our context today?" This question generated rich reflection (more than I thought it would). I was not expecting the group to quickly identify with modern-day Eunuchs as not only having a sexual deviancy, but they also included a transgender person who may not see themselves represented at all in our space. This discussion led us to ask the question, how do we let others know they are welcomed here and affirmed here, regardless of their gender expression. Participants would continue to name LGBTQ+ individuals and those living with HIV; immigrants and refugees; people with mental health diagnoses; undocumented community members; and Black youth who feel alienated from religious institutions.

Week 6 shifted the series from learning concepts to practicing the interpersonal skills needed to cultivate authentic belonging. We opened with prayer, asking God to guide us through honest reflection, vulnerability, and courage as we explored bias and trust within our community. The interactive workshop centered on implicit bias, storytelling, and trust-building, guided by the "Courageous Conversations" framework. Participants began by reflecting on how family, culture, and faith shaped unconscious assumptions. Through paired storytelling, individuals shared moments when they felt unseen or marginalized within faith spaces. These exercises fostered deep listening and empathy, revealing how emotional wounds often remain unspoken in congregational life.

Small groups then practiced tools for courageous dialogue—speaking from personal experience, listening without defensiveness, sitting with discomfort, and approaching differences with curiosity. This helped participants imagine how honest conversation could be nurtured more broadly within the church.

The group discussed this question: "What barriers to belonging still exist in our church?" Participants named structural obstacles, such as limited leadership diversity, as well as interpersonal barriers rooted in unspoken norms and emotional barriers shaped by fear or past hurt. Before closing, participants were given a few minutes to journal their immediate thoughts and feelings from the session. These final reflections were then collected, giving me their journals at the end of Week 6. This provided a meaningful body of data capturing their growth, insights, and evolving imagination around liberation and belonging. We ended with prayer, expressing gratitude for the courage shared and the trust being built among the group. In addition to the weekly sessions and journals, I also conducted several one-on-one interviews with participants throughout the weeks, allowing for deeper engagement and richer qualitative insights into their experiences and perspectives.

After collecting the journals at the conclusion of Week 6, I spent time reading through each entry carefully. While I expected to encounter vulnerability, personal insight, and theological wrestling, several entries contained unexpected and deeply sobering reflections that revealed how profoundly this series was impacting participants. These journal entries surfaced the emotional and spiritual realities that many had carried silently for years. Three entries stood out as both shocking and illuminating.

One participant wrote:

"I realized tonight that I have never once felt fully safe in any church I've been part of. I've learned to 'perform' straightness so well that I don't know who I am when I stop performing. This is the first time I've said that out loud, even on paper."

Another participant wrote:

"When I was 14, a church elder told my mother that I was 'an abomination in training.' My mother never defended me. I still hear his voice in so many places even tho I came out years ago."

Reading these entries, I felt a mixture of heartbreak, pastoral responsibility, and clarity on why this project is relevant and necessary. It became clear that the work I was facilitating was not simply educational, but it had done something so much more, which was to disrupt old wounds, resurface deeply internalized narratives, and reveal the depth of spiritual harm participants carried.

Recognizing the weight of these revelations, I reached out to my professional partner, Dr. Jonathan Wesley, to process these findings. Dr. Wesley has been a critical conversation partner throughout this project, serving as both a pastoral advisor and an academic guide. During our conversation, I shared the excerpts, my reactions, and my concerns for the emotional well-being of some of the participants. Dr. Wesley helped me frame these entries through both a pastoral and liberation-theological lens. He noted that what I was seeing in the journals was not only pain but the emergence of truth-telling, which is itself a sign of liberation.

The final session of the series carried a sense of both completion and sacred anticipation. We opened with prayer, acknowledging the emotional and spiritual journey

we had traveled together over the previous weeks. There was a quiet stillness in the room—a sense that something meaningful had already begun to shift within the group.

Participants then completed the post-project questionnaire, taking time to reflect on how their understanding of prophetic ministry, liberation, and belonging had evolved. Answering the same set of questions, they responded in the pre-questionnaire. As they wrote, many sat in contemplative silence, expressing through their responses the growth, challenges, and breakthroughs they had experienced.

During the closing discussion, the group reflected on how they might embody what they had learned beyond this series. Several expressed a desire to challenge harmful norms within the church, while others demonstrated a commitment to personal spiritual growth, allyship, and building relationships across differences. The emphasis was not simply on what had been learned, but on how that learning could be lived out in the weeks and months to come.

The most powerful moment of the evening came during our closing ritual. As we prepared to end in prayer, one participant became overwhelmed with emotion and began to cry, expressing how deeply the series had touched wounds they had carried alone for years and how this church has changed their life. Without hesitation, the group instinctively formed a prayer circle around them, laying gentle hands on their shoulders and offering spoken prayers of comfort and affirmation. This was one of the participants who identified themselves as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Each person lifted a blessing or word of encouragement to this participant. This was not planned, and I had not anticipated this. However, it was a beautiful way to see what we discussed over these past few weeks, taking an embodied form

We concluded with gratitude and acknowledgments, thanking participants for their courage, honesty, and willingness to enter into difficult but transformative conversations. As the final prayer ended, the room felt lighter. full of possibility. The closing ritual became not just the end of the series but the beginning of a renewed sense of community and purpose, a sign that the work of liberation and prophetic ministry would continue far beyond this final gathering.

Conclusion

When I entered this project, my hope wasn't to prove anything. Instead, I wanted to see what might happen if a group of people were given intentional space to wrestle with prophetic imagination, liberation, identity, and harm within a Black church context. I wasn't looking for the "right" answers. I approached this work as a pastor, a learner, and a fellow journeyer, asking simple but profound questions.

Over seven weeks of study, dialogue, worship, prayer, and deep reflection, this cohort revealed both the beauty and the brokenness present in our community. Through group discussions, written journals, interdisciplinary teaching, and one-on-one interviews, I watched participants expand their theological understanding and begin imagining what an affirming, prophetic, justice-driven church could truly look like. Many came into the series carrying fragmented stories, moments when the church uplifted them, mixed with moments when the church harmed or erased them. By the end, several participants said they felt a renewed sense of spiritual possibility and a deeper sense of belonging than they had known in years.

A few core themes rose to the surface. First, participants made it clear that you cannot claim prophetic identity while denying the fullness of people's humanity. Many admitted that this was the first time they had been asked to examine how marginalization functions within their own congregation. Using tools from Black Liberation Theology, Queer Theory, and intersectionality, participants began naming patterns of exclusion, some gently, some tearfully, some boldly. Their journals showed moments of pain and moments of breakthrough side by side, reminding me that real transformation requires both theological clarity and emotional healing.

Second, the series underscored the power of storytelling and communal vulnerability. In Week 6, and in the individual interviews I held over several weeks, people opened up in ways that were both courageous and heartbreaking. They also highlighted how urgently the church needs spaces where people can tell the truth without fear of rejection. Third, our engagement with Scripture reshaped how participants understood God's commitment to those on the margins. Many recognized themselves, their children, or their loved ones in the Eunuch's story. Participants named Acts 8 as a corrective to the exclusionary teachings they once embraced or endured. This reminded all of us that liberation is not an add-on to Christian faith; it is woven into the biblical narrative itself.

The final week made the transformation unmistakably real. During our closing circle, one participant became overwhelmed with emotion and began to cry. Without hesitation, the entire group moved toward them, creating a prayer circle full of comfort, blessing, and solidarity. That moment captured what this whole project was about! A

community learning to practice courageous love. It showed me that while we studied prophetic ministry, we were simultaneously becoming prophetic with one another.

The pre- and post-project data provided evidence of this shift. But honestly, the numbers are only part of the story. The deepest transformation showed up in the journals, the stories, the tears, the laughter, the prayers, and the sense of connection the group formed. Participants ended this series committed to challenging harmful norms, advocating for structural inclusion, and living out a prophetic faith that centers liberation and wholeness.

Even though the project has ended, its impact continues. Participants expressed a clear desire for ongoing dialogue, further study, and deeper engagement with healing and justice in the life of the church. Their reflections affirmed what I believe as a pastor and as a scholar: transformation isn't a one-time event, but it's a journey, and this project was one step toward something deeper, braver, and more liberating. Some sessions required more time than allotted, especially during emotionally charged discussions. A few participants noted that they needed more space to process difficult memories or theological shifts. At times, the group hesitated to challenge longstanding church norms, showing how deeply internalized certain beliefs were. Additionally, coordinating consistent attendance was sometimes difficult, which slightly disrupted continuity for a few participants. In future cohorts, I would incorporate structured check-in moments at the start and end of each session to better hold the emotional weight of the work. I sometimes felt I was talking too much and not giving enough time for interaction. I was so concerned with following a structure that I think I missed opportunities to engage in

conversations as they were presented. I would also consider adding a session explicitly focused on pastoral care resources and healing practices.

One of the clearest indicators of transformation came from the question, "How prepared do you feel to advocate for marginalized individuals in your church setting?" At the beginning of the project, only five participants felt equipped to do this work, and several expressed uncertainty, hesitation, or fear of "saying the wrong thing." By the end of the seven weeks, all fourteen participants reported feeling more equipped, more confident, and more theologically grounded in their ability to advocate for those who have been historically silenced or excluded in church spaces. It shows not only growth in knowledge, but growth in courage, compassion, and prophetic conviction.

By the end of the project, participants demonstrated a noticeably expanded and more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a prophetic church in today's world. At the beginning, many responses focused primarily on truth-telling (naming injustice, preaching boldly, and standing firm in Christian conviction). These were important foundations, but the definitions were often abstract or centered around proclamation alone.

After seven weeks, participants began describing a prophetic church in much broader and more embodied terms. Their final reflections emphasized that a prophetic church must not only speak truth but also practice inclusion, confront harm, honor marginalized identities, and embody liberation in its structures, relationships, and daily life. For many, the concept moved from a theological idea to a lived responsibility rooted in action and not just words. In short, participants shifted from seeing a prophetic church as one that calls out injustice externally to seeing it as a church that must also examine

and transform internally. Their understanding evolved into a more holistic and justice-oriented one that aligns far more closely with liberation theology and the lived experiences of marginalized people today.

APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Project Title:

Reclaiming the Black Church's Prophetic Voice: Queering Sacred Belief and Centering the Lives of Black Queer and Trans People

Principal Researcher:

Rev. Joty T. Allison, Doctor of Ministry Candidate, United Theological Seminary

Site of Research:

Witherspoon Presbyterian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana

Purpose of the Study

You are being invited to participate in a doctoral research project. The purpose of this study is to explore how ministry leaders within the Black Church can be equipped to promote healing and inclusion for LGBTQIA+ and Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC) through participation in a six-week theological symposium. The findings of this project will be used to fulfill requirements for the Doctor of Ministry degree at United Theological Seminary and may inform future ministry practice.

What Participation Involves

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

- Attend up to seven group sessions over approximately six weeks, held on Wednesday evenings and two Sundays at Witherspoon Presbyterian Church.
- Complete a pre-project questionnaire at the beginning of the first session.
- Complete a post-project questionnaire at the final session.
- Participate in group discussions and collaborative learning exercises.
- Maintain a personal reflection journal throughout the project.

Each session is anticipated to last approximately 60–90 minutes, though some discussions may extend beyond this timeframe.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without penalty, consequence, or impact on your standing within Witherspoon Presbyterian Church. You are not required to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

Confidentiality

Your responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. No identifying information will be published or shared without your explicit permission. When findings are reported, pseudonyms or composite descriptions will be used to protect participant identity. Survey responses, journal reflections, and group discussion notes will be stored securely and accessible only to the primary researcher.

Potential Risks and Benefits

The primary risk of participation is the emotional weight that may arise when discussing topics related to identity, sexuality, spiritual harm, and marginalization. The researcher is an ordained pastor and will be available for pastoral support throughout the process. The potential benefits include personal theological growth, development of inclusive ministry skills, and contribution to scholarship on the Black Church and QTPOC inclusion.

Consent

By signing below, you confirm that you have read and understood the information above, that your questions have been answered, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Participant Name (Print): _____

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

Pre/Post-Project Questionnaire

Pre-Project Questionnaire

Project: Reclaiming the Black Church's Prophetic Voice

Witherspoon Presbyterian Church • Indianapolis, Indiana

Instructions: Please respond to each question thoughtfully and honestly. There are no right or wrong answers. Your responses will serve as a baseline for understanding your current knowledge, beliefs, and experiences prior to the symposium. All responses are confidential.

Section 1: Theological & Ecclesial Perspectives

1. What does it mean to be a prophetic church in today's world?

2. How would you describe your current understanding of equity and inclusion within the Black Church?

3. What theological ideas or scriptures inform your view on inclusion?

Section 2: Knowledge of QTPOC Identities

4. What do you understand about QTPOC (Queer and Trans People of Color) identities and their relationship to the Black Church?

5. Who do you believe are the most marginalized in the church today, and why?

Section 3: Personal Experience & Readiness

6. When, if ever, have you witnessed or participated in conversations about QTPOC inclusion in a church setting?

7. Why do you believe some churches struggle with affirming LGBTQIA+ individuals?

8. How prepared do you feel to advocate for marginalized individuals in your church setting?

☐ Feel equipped to advocate ☐ Uncertain/Hesitation ☐ Not Equipped

APPENDIX C

Symposium Session Outline

Week 1 — Orientation & Introduction to the Project

Date: Sunday, June 15, 2025

Objectives:

- Establish group covenant, shared norms, and sacred space.
- Introduce the central hypothesis and purpose of the project.
- Administer pre-project questionnaire.

Topics Covered:

- What is a prophetic church? Opening exploration of prophetic imagination.
- Overview of the six-week arc: theology, identity, practice, and transformation.
- Introduction to QTPOC identities and the project's guiding scripture (Acts 8:26–40).

Discussion Prompt:

What brought you to this table, and what do you hope to take away?

Week 2 — Theological Foundation: Prophetic Imagination & Liberation

Date: Wednesday, June 18, 2025

Objectives:

- Ground participants in the biblical prophetic tradition (Amos, Isaiah).
- Introduce Black Liberation Theology as an interpretive framework.
- Explore Brueggemann's concept of prophetic imagination.

Topics Covered:

- Hebrew Bible prophets: spiritual fidelity and social justice.
- James Cone's Black Liberation Theology and its implications for inclusive ministry.
- The prophetic call to critique injustice and energize transformation.

Discussion Prompts:

- What challenged or surprised you in this teaching?
- Can the church be prophetic without affirming all identities in its midst?

Week 3 — Interdisciplinary Foundation: Cultural Identity, Marginalization & Psychological Impact

Date: Wednesday, June 25, 2025

Objectives:

- Examine intersectionality as a framework for understanding compounded marginalization.
- Engage clinical research on spiritual trauma among QTPOC individuals.

Topics Covered:

- bell hooks on belonging, harm, and communities shaped by love.
- Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality applied to queer spirituality.
- Research on minority stress, internalized shame, and religious rejection.

Discussion Prompts:

- What systems of marginalization show up in our own faith community?
- How does unintentional harm operate within affirming spaces?

Week 4 — DEI Principles in Practice: Hospitality, Inclusion & Dismantling Bias

Date: Wednesday, July 2, 2025

Objectives:

- Define and distinguish diversity, equity, and inclusion within a faith context.
- Study local church case studies in substantive structural inclusion.

Topics Covered:

- DEI as spiritual practice: who is present, how power flows, whether all can flourish.
- Case studies: Life Journey Church and Broadway United Methodist Church (Indianapolis).
- Implicit bias and its effects on worship, leadership, and pastoral care.

Discussion Prompt:

Where do you see bias operating in our congregation's life, even unintentionally?

Week 5 — Scripture Study: Acts 8 and Honoring the Stranger

Date: Wednesday, July 9, 2025

Objectives:

- Close reading of Acts 8:26–40 through historical-critical and queer lenses.
- Connect the Ethiopian Eunuch narrative to QTPOC experiences today.

Topics Covered:

- The Eunuch as a sexually, racially, and religiously marginalized figure.
- The Spirit's initiative: Philip's disruption, divine inclusion, and radical baptism.
- 'What is to prevent me from being baptized?' as a theological question of belonging.

Discussion Prompt:

Who are the 'Ethiopian Eunuchs' in our context today? What barriers prevent their full belonging?

Week 6 — Dialogue: Addressing Bias & Building Trust

Date: Wednesday, July 16, 2025

Objectives:

- Practice courageous dialogue tools for navigating difference and discomfort.
- Identify concrete barriers to belonging within the congregation.

Topics Covered:

- Courageous Conversations framework: speaking from experience, listening without defense.
- Trust-building across theological and identity difference.

Discussion Prompts:

- What barriers to belonging still exist in our church?
- What will it take to move from performative to prophetic inclusion?

Week 7 — Evaluation & Forward Movement

Date: Sunday, July 20, 2025

Objectives:

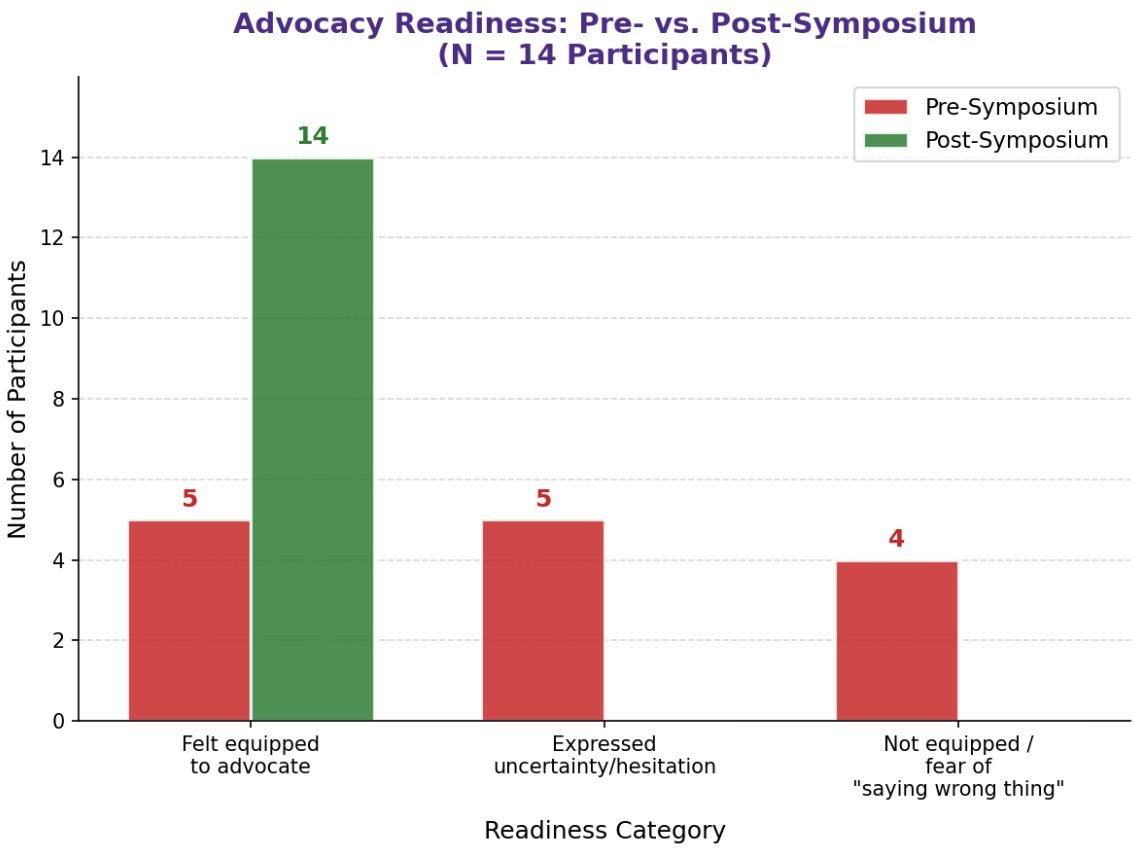
- Administer post-project questionnaire and collect final journal entries.
- Celebrate growth and honor the emotional labor of participants.
- Discern collective next steps for continued transformation.

Topics Covered:

- Reflective debrief: What have we learned? What has shifted?
- Action planning: How do we embody this work in the life of the congregation?
- Closing ritual: communal prayer, affirmation, and shared benediction.

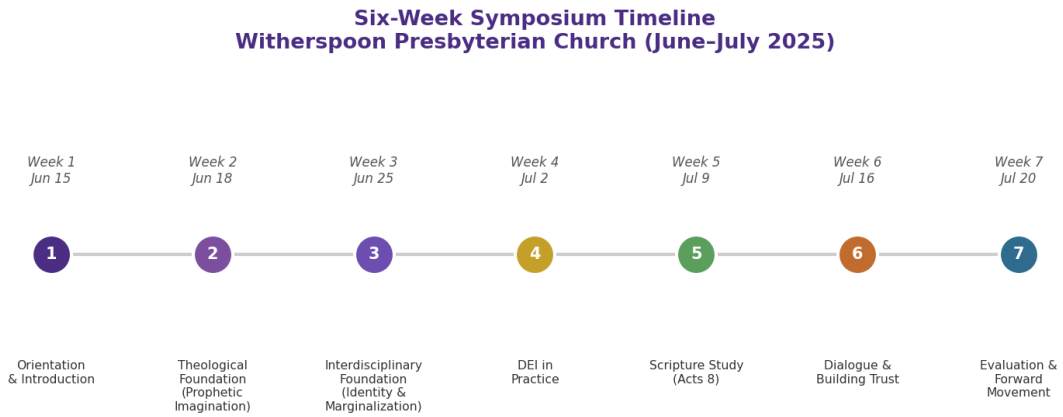
APPENDIX D

Advocacy Readiness


Advocacy Readiness: Pre- vs. Post-Symposium
(N = 14 Participants)
Pre-Symposium
Post-Symposium
Number of Participants
0
2
4
6
8
10
12
14
5
14
5
4
Felt equipped to advocate
Expressed uncertainty/hesitation
Not equipped / fear of "saying wrong thing"
Readiness Category

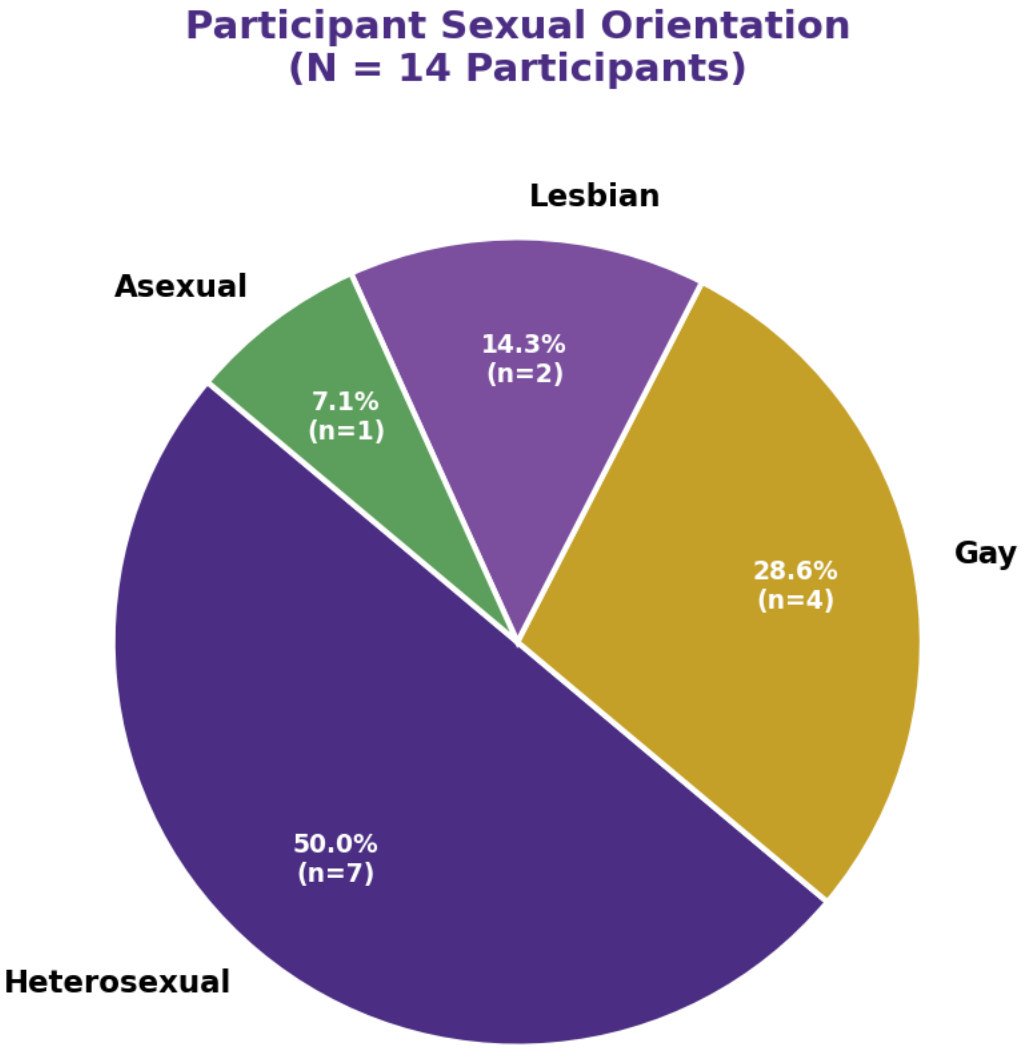
APPENDIX E

Symposium Timeline


Six-Week Symposium Timeline
Witherspoon Presbyterian Church (June–July 2025)
Week 1
Jun 15
Week 2
Jun 18
Week 3
Jun 25
Week 4
Jul 2
Week 5
Jul 9
Week 6
Jul 16
Week 7
Jul 20
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
Orientation & Introduction
Theological Foundation (Prophetic Imagination)
Interdisciplinary Foundation (Identity & Marginalization)
DEI in Practice
Scripture Study (Acts 8)
Dialogue & Building Trust
Evaluation & Forward Movement

APPENDIX F

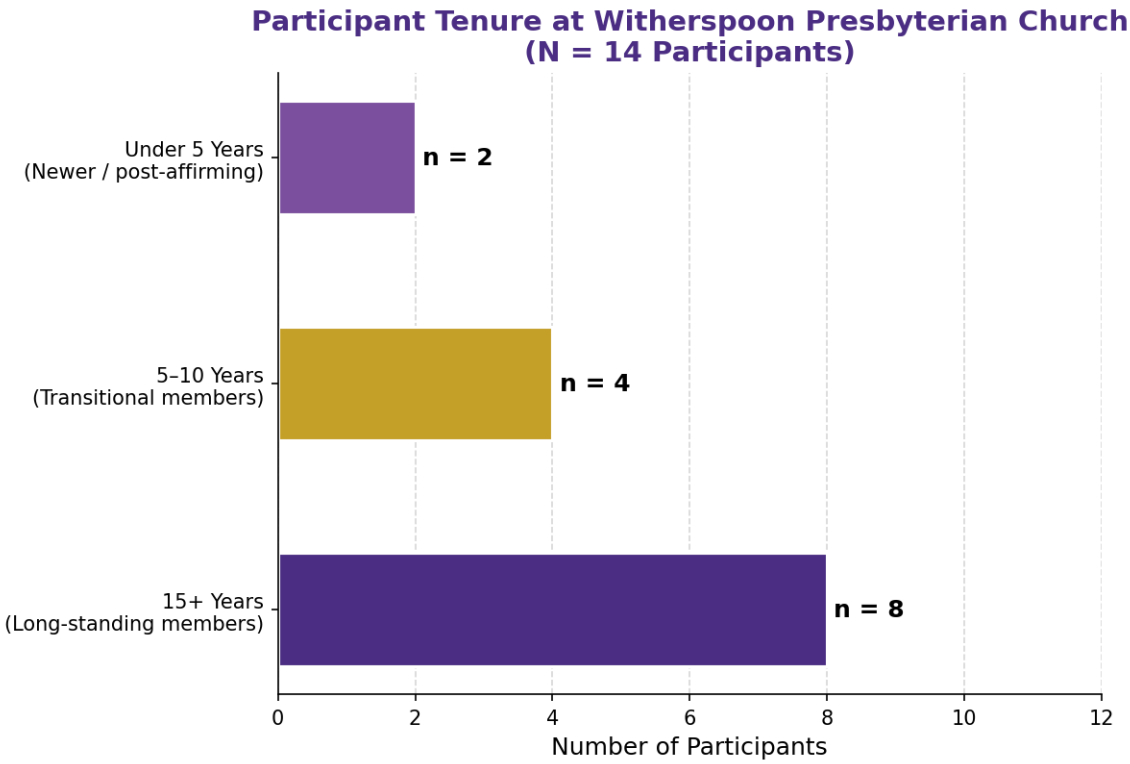
Participant Sexual Orientation



Bisexual & Pansexual categories included in survey; no participants identified with those labels.

APPENDIX G

Participant Tenure


Participant Tenure at Witherspoon Presbyterian Church
(N = 14 Participants)
Under 5 Years
(Newer / post-affirming)
n = 2
5–10 Years
(Transitional members)
n = 4
15+ Years
(Long-standing members)
n = 8
0
2
4
6
8
10
12
Number of Participants

APPENDIX H

Participant Profile

Characteristic	Range / Description
Age range	26 to 67 years of age
Gender representation	Mixed gender — male, female, and non-binary identifying individuals
Race/ethnicity	Primarily Black/African American, with racially diverse representation
Ministry role	Mix of ministry leaders and lay members
Recruitment method	General congregational announcement; no participant was directly solicited
Session attendance	All 14 completed all 7 sessions; consistent attendance throughout

APPENDIX I

Journal Prompts

Week 1 Journal Prompt — Orientation

Why am I here? What am I carrying into this space — assumptions, fears, questions, or hopes? Who in my own life or community represents someone who has been excluded from the church? What do I hope changes through this project?

Week 2 Journal Prompt — Prophetic Imagination

How does the idea of a 'prophetic church' challenge or affirm the way I currently understand my faith community? Have I ever felt called to prophetic action? What held me back? How does Black Liberation Theology intersect with my own spiritual journey?

Week 3 Journal Prompt — Cultural Identity & Spiritual Trauma

When I consider intersectionality, what identities do I bring to my faith? Have I ever been the person in the room whose identity made them invisible or suspect? How has this session changed the way I see the relationship between spiritual community and harm?

Week 4 Journal Prompt — DEI in Practice

Where have I seen genuine inclusion practiced in ministry? Where have I witnessed the gap between a church's stated welcome and its actual practices? What is one bias I may carry that I have not examined before? What would it cost me to name and challenge it?

Week 5 Journal Prompt — Acts 8 and the Ethiopian Eunuch

Who are the 'Ethiopian Eunuchs' in my life and ministry context? What would it look like for me to be Philip — someone who stops, runs alongside, and says yes without conditions? What prevents our church from fully enacting this kind of radical inclusion?

Week 6 Journal Prompt — Courageous Dialogue

Was there a moment in our conversation tonight that was difficult for me? What made it hard? What did I hear from someone else that shifted something in me? What truth

did I speak, or fail to speak, and why? What does authentic belonging feel like for me in this community?

Week 7 Journal Prompt — Evaluation & Forward Movement

Looking back across these seven weeks, what has changed in me? What do I now see, believe, or feel that I did not before? What am I being called to do? What is the one commitment I will carry out of this room and into my life in the church?

APPENDIX J

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Asexual	An individual who experiences little to no sexual attraction to others. Asexuality exists on a continuum and may include romantic or emotional attraction without sexual desire.
Bisexual	Denotes attraction to more than one gender, often both men and women, though not necessarily in the same way or degree.
Black Liberation Theology	A theological movement, developed most prominently by James H. Cone, that interprets Christian scripture and doctrine through the lived realities of Black suffering, resistance, and liberation.
Cisgender	A person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth.
DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)	A framework for addressing systemic barriers and creating environments where all people are welcomed, respected, and able to fully participate. Used in this project as a spiritual practice.
Eunuch (Historical)	In ancient contexts, eunuchs were individuals who were castrated, often serving in royal courts. Eunuchs occupied a liminal space between gender categories and were often excluded from religious communities.
Gay	Describes individuals who experience romantic and/or sexual attraction primarily to people of the same gender. In this project, four participants identified as gay men.
Heterosexual	Refers to individuals who experience romantic and/or sexual attraction to people of a different gender. Seven participants in this project identified as heterosexual.
Imago Dei	Latin for 'image of God.' A theological concept rooted in Genesis 1:26–27 affirming that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God.
Intersectionality	A term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw describing how overlapping social identities (race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.) create compounded systems of discrimination and privilege.
Kinetheos	A term coined by the researcher meaning 'faith in action' or 'Spirit-led movement.' It describes the theological principle of radical movement toward liberation in obedience to God's call.
Lesbian	Refers to women who experience romantic and/or sexual attraction primarily to other women. Two participants in this project identified as lesbian.

LGBTQIA+	An acronym representing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual individuals, among others. The '+' represents additional identities within the broader community.
Minority Stress	The excess stress experienced by members of marginalized groups as a result of stigma, discrimination, and the social challenges associated with occupying a minority identity.
Open and Affirming	A designation within various Protestant denominations (including the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.) indicating that a congregation explicitly welcomes and affirms LGBTQIA+ individuals in all aspects of church life.
Pansexual	Characterizes attraction to individuals regardless of gender identity or biological sex.
Performative Inclusivity	Inclusion that appears progressive on the surface (e.g., welcoming statements, Pride Month observances) but does not extend to structural change, ongoing practice, or centering marginalized voices.
Prophetic Imagination	A concept developed by theologian Walter Brueggemann describing the church's dual calling to critique unjust realities and energize the imagination of a transformed, justice-oriented future.
QTPOC	Queer and Trans People of Color. Refers to individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community and hold racial or ethnic minority identities, experiencing the compounded effects of both.
Queer Theory	An interdisciplinary academic framework that challenges normative categories of gender and sexuality, examining how power structures define and regulate identity.
Spiritual Trauma	Psychological and spiritual harm caused by harmful religious experiences, including rejection, condemnation, or exclusion by faith communities due to one's identity or lived experience.
Transgender	An umbrella term describing individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex assigned to them at birth.

APPENDIX K

Recommended Resources for Continued Congregational Study

Theological & Biblical Resources

- Burke, Sean D. Queering the Ethiopian Eunuch: Strategies of Ambiguity in Acts. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.
- Brueggemann, Walter. The Prophetic Imagination. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Cone, James H. A Black Theology of Liberation. 40th Anniversary ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010.
- Hester, J. David. 'Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19:12 and Transgressive Sexualities.' Journal for the Study of the New Testament 28, no. 1 (2005): 13–40.
- Yoder, John Howard. The Politics of Jesus. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

Interdisciplinary & Social Justice Resources

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.' Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299.
- Hooks, bell. All About Love: New Visions. New York: William Morrow, 2000.
- Russaw, Kimberly D. Daughters in the Hebrew Bible. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018
- Weber, Max. Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Pastoral Care & Ministry Practice

- Cheng, Patrick S. Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology. New York: Seabury Books, 2011.
- Hartke, Austen. Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.
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Affirming Organizations & Networks

- More Light Presbyterians (mlp.org) — A network supporting full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

- The Reformation Project (reformationproject.org) — A Bible-based organization promoting inclusion of LGBTQ people in Christian churches.
- The National LGBTQ Task Force (thetaskforce.org) — Advocacy and resources for LGBTQ people of faith.
- GLSEN (glsen.org) — Resources on safe, affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ youth in educational and faith settings.

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